Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Kanbal

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(Book 9 of the Guardian of the Spirit series)

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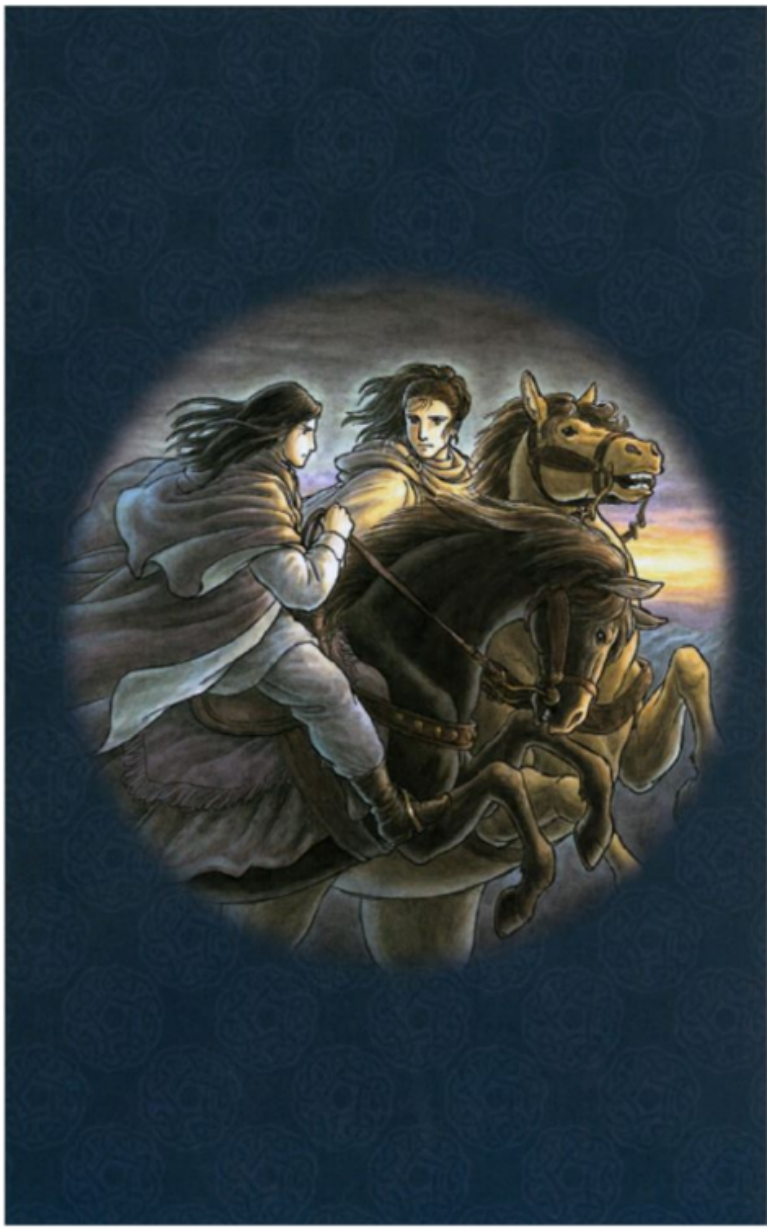

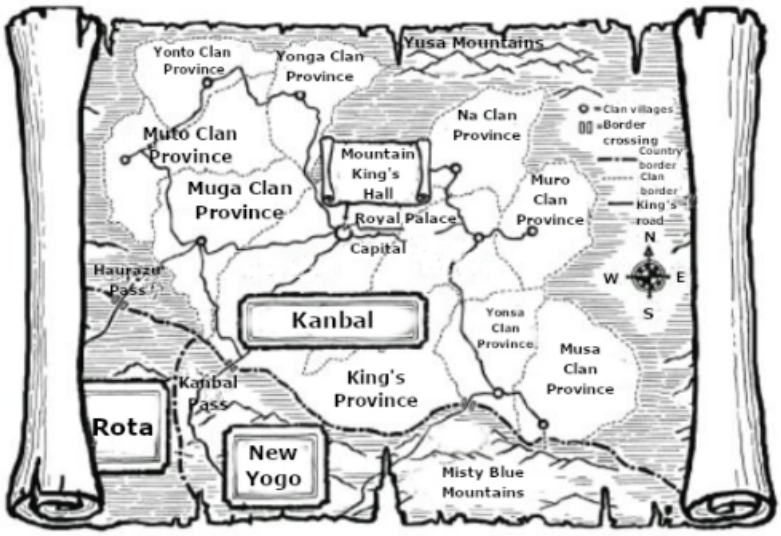
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Excerpt from Chagum’s Diary

Balsa is still sleeping--she seems to be sleeping very deeply. She does that: falls immediately asleep and sleeps like the dead, and immediately springs to wakefulness, like sleep is a state she can snap out of by conscious will.

I can't sleep, and even if I could, I doubt I'll ever be able to sleep as deeply as Balsa. Whenever I sleep, I dream. My heart urges me to hurry on as fast as I can, whether I'm sleeping or awake.

I wonder if the King of Kanbal really will agree to an alliance. The future depends on it, but I’m not very hopeful. When I tried to persuade him in Sangal using the very best reasoning I had, he still put off giving me an answer.

Talsh is breathing down our necks. By the time they actually get here, any alliance I make may be too late. I know there’s a Talsh spy close to the King of Kanbal as well, and he’ll do anything he can to prevent the alliance.

I’ve learned that the Talsh are clever. They know how to use people. I need to prepare myself. Prince Hazar is the one who encouraged the southern clan lords in Rota to revolt--not Prince Raul. I don’t know why that is, but I have to figure it out. The reason may give us an advantage.

Prince Raul has the right to conquer northern Rota and New Yogo. I’ve met him; I can’t believe he’s happy about sharing the right to subjugate different pieces of the northern continent. He wants it all to himself. It seems clear to me that whoever conquers the whole of Rota will gain Kanbal to their cause next.

So my guess is that Prince Hazar sent spies or messengers to Kanbal first, before his younger brother Prince Raul could pre-empt his plans. Talsh has no force of arms here yet, so they’ll be moving quickly and quietly, using their spies. A spy capable of winning over the King of

Kanbal would have to be very convincing--I'm certain that the King would have to trust the spy to agree.

Prince Hazar and Prince Raul are engaged in a desperate struggle; it's sibling rivalry on a grand scale. The prize they're fighting over is the entire northern continent.

I should probably thank Hugo, if I see him, for setting me on this path. I don't trust him, but I believe him when he says he hates war and doesn't want to see people killed.

Still, Hugo is a spy for Prince Raul. If I manage to thwart Prince Hazar's spy and successfully broker an alliance between Rota and Kanbal, that means that Prince Hazar's side would lose to Prince Raul's. I expect that's why Hugo suggested this course of action. If I succeed, so will he, while I do all the work.

I'm prey caught between two hunters. Neither has caught me yet, but maintaining my freedom will be hard… Prince Hazar sent assassins once. I'm certain there will be more.

It looks like the blizzard's finally ending. I can't hear the wind anymore.

Balsa's still asleep…

Prologue: Light on the Snow

The moon shone bright in the evening sky. The herder Yoyo looked out at the snow cast in shadow on the tips of the Yusa mountains. He blew into his hands to keep them warm.

It was the beginning of winter now. The herder people of Kanbal were always frantically busy from autumn going into winter; there was a sense of pressure like an advancing wave to complete all their tasks before the land slept over the cold season.

But this year, the land had not slept at the onset of winter. It was still awake: vibrant and alive. The elder of the herder people, Toto, pointed to all kinds of evidence for this.

“The stone of the caves is still wet! And the rock is still warm; can’t you feel it?”

Most of the herders had nodded and shaken their heads at such words, but the older ones realized that what he was saying was true. The air was usually dry and cold in winter, but this year, every advancing breeze smelled like spring--even underground, deep in the caves.

I wonder why Kassa doesn’t smell it.

Yoyo recalled his friend’s face. Kassa was not a herder, but one of Kanbal’s clan people. He’d been born above the caves, and that was where he lived and worked. The herder people lived in deep in the heart of the mountains, but people like Kassa were different. Kassa’s family lived closest to the herder people out of all of Kanbal’s clans, but Kassa did not share any of the herder’s capabilities. When Yoyo had asked him to put his nose to the stone of the caves to smell it, Kassa had tried, but then laughed. He couldn’t smell anything.

I guess only the herder people can smell the stone. Why is that? Should we worry about it?

Toto and the Musa clan head were in frequent contact. If the herder people did discover anything dangerous or worth reporting, Yoyo was certain that Toto would send a message. But Yoyo was concerned for Kassa. He wanted him to be able to tell that there was trouble before he heard it from his clan head.

Well, there are some things that he tells me that I just don't understand, either. I guess our peoples are just too different...but I really wish we could understand each other.

Yoyo would be twenty soon. He had his full adult height, but the herders were not a tall people. It bothered Yoyo that his people's short stature was so often looked down upon. The herders might be small, and they might not be descended from Kanbal's clan lords, but they were as tough as the mountains themselves.

Truthfully, Yoyo had always wanted to be a King's Spear. He was talented with his weapon, but he wasn't qualified for the position: he wasn't part of a clan. Nothing had ever become of his dreams.

I imagine the King's Spears are just as worried as I am right now.

Yoyo removed his leather boots and walked barefoot through the caves. He wanted to call Kassa, but calling people who were not herders from within the caves was not something that was generally done. He was trembling fiercely and couldn't calm himself; he clenched his fists. If the elders could see him now, they'd probably tease him for being frightened like a little child.

He had felt the same sense of dread when the other elders had laughed with Toto about the land staying awake this winter. He had only just been married last spring, but he was old enough to know that there was something very strange and wrong going on.

The herders were mountain people; the mountains' heart and their hearts beat to the same rhythm. When one herder felt anxiety and unease at the level of the mountain's gutrock, they all felt it. Yoyo was scared. He didn't know why, but he was absolutely terrified.

Winter, please keep your eyes and ears open--at least until I reach the cave.

Yoyo spent his winters at Toto's large, warm cave with all the young herders. Toto's cave was his family's, but he owned several around it as well; when the herders gathered there over winter, the caves became like a small town. Yoyo was hoping to share one of these caves with a friend.

Is it just me, or has it gotten a lot colder?

He met his friend along the way. He could hear the man's teeth chattering as he walked behind him. It was so cold in winter that no fire would take in the caves, even if the hyoulu, guardians of the darkness, would permit one. The winter chill cut through Yoyo all the way to the bone.

Yoyo and his companion stopped to eat some yuccal leaves, then rubbed their limbs and extremities with sap excreted from other leaves, which warmed them up somewhat. Yoyo still felt like his hands were made of ice.

"We should probably put yuccal sap on our noses and stomachs, too," Yoyo said.

His friend turned toward him and chuckled. "Do you really think that would help us warm up? My stomach and nose are both completely covered up, but they feel like they're red from the cold."

The two of them laughed a little, shivering. There was a high sound like a whistle coming from somewhere nearby. It was still dark, but the closeness of the whistle meant that they were nearing a cave entrance.

Yoyo had been traveling south for all this time, surrounded only by mountains and snow. When he emerged from the caves into a vast and starry clear space, he gasped.

Among all the bright stars, there was a line of particularly bright ones. They were moving: moving through the sky like a trail of light. The whistle sounded again, and it seemed to Yoyo that the bright lights in the sky were following its echo and drifting directly toward the sound.

The whistling echoed down the southern slope. The lights moved, illuminating the mountains and the sky like a beacon. There were so

many that Yoyo couldn’t count them all.

When he turned around, he saw that the path of light in the sky continued for a far distance. The twinkling, shining lights were as white as snow. Yoyo heard a faint sound like bells and the gentle humming of riran insect wings as the line of light drew ever closer. He looked down at the southern slope leading down the mountain.

Yoyo had taken a small amount of togal to see in better in the dark; consuming large amounts of the plant was poisonous. Short-tailed weasel riders were faintly visible below him, bearing torches. The herders called them Chil Kal, Little Brothers. The Kanbalese called them Titi Lan. Yoyo had never seen so many gathered in one place before. More emerged from their caves in the mountainside as Yoyo watched. They faced the south all together and at once, like they were celebrating some kind of ceremony.

Titi Lan usually made their lamps and torches out of delicate stalks that were light enough for them to hold. Today, there were so many flickering flames on the mountain slope that they looked like feathers on a bird's wing. The sound of the ririn bug's wings susurrating grew louder in Yoyo's ears. He could see the Titi Lan clearly; they appeared pale and astonished - or afraid. What on earth had happened?

"Are all those Chil Kal?" Yoyo's companion asked. He had emerged from the cave and was looking down at the fantastical sight.

"Can't be," Yoyo whispered. "There are too many."

The Titi Lan were a reclusive people who hunted in small groups by the light of the moon. They were considered the closest creatures to the Mountain King, having a better understanding of him than even the herders possessed. They stood on the slope below, facing south with their torches held high, and did not give Yoyo or his companion so much as a passing glance.

The sound of bells grew louder, as did the whispering sound of a swarm of insects in flight. Yoyo covered his ears and saw his companion do the same. He felt dizzy, like he was about to fall. He gritted his teeth

and planted his feet. His head hurt like it was being torn open from the inside.

"We have to run!" he yelled to his companion. "Get down the mountain, before we go insane!"

They fled like fleet-footed hyo rabbits down the mountain slope, kicking up snow as they went. The deafening roar of competing sounds gradually receded. They hadn't run far before Yoyo felt something warm and soft brush against his face. It was like being suspended in sun-warmed water in the middle of summer, only even warmer than that. Yoyo smelled water, too, and its smell was different from the clear cold streams of winter. He could almost sense fish and other living things

suspended in this mysterious water, as if they were swimming near him--but he couldn't see them.

When he looked down, he saw that his body was almost entirely submerged in warm, crystalline blue water: as blue as gemstones. The water level in Noyook had risen very high: all the way up the mountain to here. He could scarcely keep his footing on the rocky slope because he was so close to floating. Even his head was submerged. When he looked up, he saw the mass of migrating bright lights through the water’s haze. They were moving from the south to the north. They looked like they were swimming.

Yoyo and his companion remained suspended in Noyook's water for what felt like a long time, seeing these confusing and terrifying visions. When the water finally let them go, they sprinted all the way down the mountain to their home village.

Part 1: Kanbal

Chapter 1 - The Wisdom of Guards

The vast blue sky spread out to the horizon line.

The blizzard had raged for more than three days, but now, it was finally over. The bright sunshine felt warm and pleasant. Chagum and Balsa were staying at an inn that was usually frequented by guard escorts; light shone in through the dining hall's single window. Breakfast was Rotan unleavened bread called bam fried with butter in the hall's inset fireplace. Balsa placed a jar of honey on a low table. She layered honey on top of her buttered bread and bit into it, then frowned at Chagum. He was in the corner of the room, staring out the window.

"Bam's ready!" Balsa said.

Chagum blinked, then smiled. He crossed the room and retrieved his own portion of bam, then started to eat. The right side of his face was still bandaged, so eating was somewhat difficult. Still, his wound felt much better than it had even a day or so ago. They'd stopped in Toluan to see a doctor; whatever he'd put on the wound had brought the swelling down.

Balsa was concerned about scarring and had wanted it stitched up, but the doctor had said that was unnecessary. Now that the wound was clean, it should heal fine on its own. There would be a scar either way; the doctor had seemed to think that stitching the wound closed might make the scar more pronounced.

Chagum didn't really care if the wound left a scar. He'd survived an assassination attempt; that struck him as more important than cosmetic details. If he were still the Crown Prince of New Yogo, it would be unthinkable for him to ever have an obvious scar on his face, but he'd faked his own death and wasn't considered part of the imperial family anymore, so he considered the wound irrelevant except when it pained him. He dipped his bam in honey and ate slowly. He had never cared much for butter or cheese.

Balsa didn't know this; she seemed shocked when he passed on the butter. "Why not try it? It's delicious."

Chagum wrinkled his nose and felt the edges of his wound stretch a little. "I can't stand the smell. I don't like goat meat or mutton, either. It all smells unappetizing to me. I've never understood why people eat that stuff, but I guess it's tasty to most people."

Balsa nodded slowly in understanding. Goat and sheep weren't generally eaten in New Yogo. He was probably more used to eating beef, pork, and chicken. Since he'd been raised apart from the common people, he'd never gotten used to the smell of sheep or goats, either. Balsa remembered leaving her home village and crossing the mountains with Jiguro to New Yogo. She hadn't been able to eat anything at first. She'd been urgently hungry, but everything had smelled and tasted terrible.

Most people thought that the Rotans and Kanbalese people were closely related. The story went that they were once part of the same culture and nation, but that Kanbal's high mountains had caused separation and differences over the course of many generations. Kanbal's food, language and social structure were all very similar to Rota's, but New Yogo's was completely different; the Yogoese had emigrated from the southern continent, bringing their strange language and cuisine with them.

Chagum had been raised carefully as an imperial prince in the palace at Kosenkyo; it was only natural that he would hate the sharp and unfamiliar smell of sheep or goat milk. But Chagum wasn't a picky eater in most respects. He also traveled and slept on the cold hard floors of cheap inns without complaint. It was hard to believe he'd ever been a spoiled and pampered Crown Prince.

Even the taste of the honey was somewhat unfamiliar to Chagum. He looked at Balsa as he ate with impatience burning in his eyes. "We can't stay long," he said. "We should be on our way as soon as we're finished eating."

Balsa frowned a little. "It's been a few days since the blizzard, so I expect more guards will come to this place soon." She was thinking of hiring a few more guards to help her and Chagum cross the border. She doubted that the Talsh assassin she'd defeated had been alone--and there would likely be others before long, anyway. It seemed that Chagum had seen something he shouldn't have: the face of the Talsh spy who was closest to the King of Kanbal.

Balsa had learned from another spy, Hugo, that Talsh assassins had been given orders to prevent Chagum from reaching Kanbal. Balsa found it hard to believe that this task had been entrusted to a single assassin. She expected traps and ambushes in the near future if they kept traveling on the road.

In fact, she knew that there were more enemy forces out there, and that they might be after her and Chagum already. The Kashal had intercepted and either killed or severely wounded a group of assassins. The Talsh had split their forces, sending one group after Chagum and his Rotan guard escort; the other group had done battle with the Kashal. There might be survivors among the Talsh forces. If Balsa were in their position, she would rush to Kanbal's border with Rota and wait for Chagum there.

The pass that led into Rota to the north was steep and difficult to navigate during winter. It was called Haurazu Pass. The way was much frequented by bandits, especially at a deep gorge called Usal, where they liked to camp and hide. It was the perfect place to spring a trap for Chagum; Balsa knew it.

Ordinarily, she would hire guards from Makal fortress in northern Rota to help defend her and Chagum on the way to Kanbal, but there were none to be hired: every spare guard and soldier was needed for Rota's impending civil war.

Balsa had asked around about guards for hire when she and Chagum had stopped in Toluan; she'd hoped to find several of her colleagues--and possibly even friends--willing to help them. She hadn't found anyone trustworthy and strong enough to hire on. It was almost as if

the Talsh assassins had swept through Toluan and picked it clean of extra guards; the few that remained were there to guard the town, or were too green and inexperienced to be of much help.

The guard shortage was due to the Talsh assassins, in a way. Reports of recent attacks on the road meant that every traveling merchant in Rota was looking to hire extra protection.

It seemed that Balsa would have to protect Chagum herself, without help. They had almost made it to the border: they had no choice but to cross now.

Balsa had crossed Usal gorge as a guard escort as part of a caravan before. She and her charges had simply blended in with other merchants and guards on the road, so they'd mostly avoided notice. She'd worn a Kanabalese-style hooded coat called a karru to conceal her face, plus a shuma to keep her warmer and further conceal her identity. Looking like any other traveler, or a native just passing through, reduced the chances of being attacked.

Chagum seemed to guess a little of what she was thinking. "We could hire guards here, maybe, but they probably wouldn't want to leave until tomorrow. That's too late. We don't even know what the weather will be like tomorrow. We should move while we still can." He frowned, then leaned forward toward Balsa. "The most important thing now isn't my personal safety. It's time. We must reach Kanbal as quickly as possible." His voice echoed in the dining hall. There was no one in it except for him and Balsa.

"We'll need more protection if the Talsh assassins find us," Balsa said.

Chagum shook his head. "If we make it too late, the outcome will be the same as it would if they killed us. If Kanbal doesn't send reinforcements, and soon, countless Rotan soldiers will die. Listen, Balsa: we have to leave, now. I'll go alone if I have to." His face was bright red; his eyes displayed his clear irritation.

Balsa stared at Chagum for a long moment. He'd been all but banished by his father when he'd been sent to Sangal--and in Sangal, the Talsh had captured him and taken him south to their strange

continent. After he'd returned from there by ship, he'd undertaken a dangerous sea journey, mostly alone. He would travel alone again if he had to. The lives of the people on the northern continent weighed heavily on his mind.

It was winter: no one traveled between Kanbal and Rota in winter. Even most traveling merchants dug in their heels and waited for spring.

Balsa sighed deeply. "Fine. We'll go now." She packed up some fire-baked fruit candies called jocum and dried meat into her pack, along with the other supplies she'd bought for the journey over the mountains. Chagum's preparations were already complete. They left the inn to find their horses a little before noon.

They had traded their swift-running horses for sturdy pack horses with thick legs and necks at Toluan. Their manes were very long and their coats were thick: they were ideal for traveling in the mountains. Chagum had selected his horse personally at the market in Toluan. "I like this one. His eyes remind me of Tanda's."

Balsa had burst out laughing. Chagum had taken to calling the horse "Tanda."

"Why did you have to name him that?" Balsa muttered as she walked. They found their horses; Balsa reached out and petted her horse's mane.

"Because he didn't have a name," Chagum said simply. "What's your horse's name?"

"He doesn't have one."

"Why not?" Chagum asked.

"When you name an animal," Balsa said, "parting with them gets that much harder." Chagum was standing behind Balsa; she didn't see the indescribably sad look that he gave her.

Both Tanda and No-Name were calm and well-behaved horses that could find their footing and climb uphill without any trouble on the steep path out of the village. They used their hips and backs to brace and support themselves when the road suddenly worsened--and sometimes vanished altogether. They were fully in the mountains now.

By the time the sun set, Chagum was completely exhausted. His knees could barely support him when he dismounted. Balsa was much older than he was, but she was also used to traveling in the mountains; she didn't seem tired at all. Chagum glanced sidelong at her and sighed. He was allowed to be a little jealous.

The road was only going to get steeper and narrower as they got closer to Kanbal. The trees they saw were all covered in a thick layer of snow. The wind was cold and sharp enough to cut; when it dislodged snow from the trees, the resounding echo of the snow hitting the ground reverberated in all directions.

It was hard to believe that such a poorly maintained road was used to legally cross over into Kanbal. Sometimes, Kanbalese laborers used this road to reach Rota or New Yogo for work, but Balsa and Chagum encountered no one. The first sign of life they discovered was near a riverbank when they left the main path for a narrower-side road. The riverbank was full of hoof prints from at least a dozen horses. Balsa guessed that the horses had passed through a few hours ago, but the prints were as clear and crisp as if they'd been freshly made.

"These look like the tracks of riders that get sent ahead of a caravan," Balsa said. "I guess they stopped here this afternoon."

Chagum looked down at the tracks and frowned. "How do you know they were with a caravan? Couldn't the assassins or bandits have stopped here?"

"You can tell by the tracks," Balsa said. "These horses were heavy. Their movement pattern is scattered. There's been no attempt to hide their tracks or conceal where they went from here--both of which I would expect from bandits or assassins."

Balsa and Chagum continued on their way. Late on their second day of travel, the path evened out, then began to descend gently down. They would pass over Usal gorge if they kept going this way and didn't turn aside. The trees to the left began to thin out. When Balsa could see the gorge in the distance, she stopped her horse.

"What's wrong?" Chagum asked.

Balsa put a finger to her lips. She could hear voices--not many, but one of them sounded like a child's. "The voices aren't coming from the gorge," she whispered. "They're in the trees. They're probably the caravan that stopped at the riverbank this afternoon."

She turned to the right and entered the trees with Chagum near her. "They have children with them, so there's probably no danger," she said, "but we still need to be careful." Crossing the gorge was dangerous at the best of times. Balsa found it hard to believe that the caravan intended to do that when they had children to protect.

“Let’s announce ourselves,” she said severely. “Stay behind me.”
The fact that this group had children with them and was taking such a dangerous route through the mountains smacked of inexperience. Balsa didn’t want to get caught up in their problems if she could help it. Chagum’s safety was her primary concern; everything else was secondary. She couldn’t completely dismiss the idea that bandits could be using children as bait to lure people closer.

Balsa sighed and turned her horse toward the treeline. She followed a line of hoof prints forward in the direction of the voices.

Some minutes later, people and horses came into view. They had found a natural cave and chosen to make camp there. The cave amplified their voices so that Balsa was able to hear them from far away.

The voices suddenly ceased. A stooped figure came out to observe Balsa and Chagum as they drew closer to the cave. Balsa counted about four people milling around the cave, but the one who had come out to greet them was armed with a drawn sword. He was probably a caravan guard.

“Halt and declare yourselves!” the guard shouted. Another guard emerged from the trees behind him; he’d been hidden before. The first guard bore a short sword, but the second had unsheathed his long sword and was coming closer.

The guard who had called out was familiar to her. She threw back the hood of her coat and removed her shuma face covering to reveal herself

and look at him more closely.

He squinted at her. He was older than the other guard and had a competent, seasoned air. “Balsa?” he asked. “Is that you?”

Balsa smiled and dismounted. “Gol,” she said. “I had no idea you were still in this business.”

Gol put a hand over his mouth and laughed. “Well, I wanted to retire, but then my son said he wanted to be a guard escort like me...and there’s a war on, have you heard?” His eyes sparkled. “Anyway, this is my son’s first job, so I decided to come with. He still has a lot to learn.”

A young man emerged from the trees and frowned at Gol. “Don’t talk so loud,” he said in a tone of irritation. “No one needs to know this is my first job, dad.”

The young man sheathed his sword and looked Balsa up and down with his arms crossed.

Gol smiled. “Anyway. What good luck to run into you here, Balsa. Are you planning to cross the gorge?”

Balsa nodded. “I’m headed to Kanbal. But, Gol--do you really intend to cross Usal’s gorge with just a few guards? You have families with children to protect.”

Gol frowned. “This family has, ah, unusual circumstances. They’re traveling merchants and made a few bad business deals, so they were forced to flee. They’re planning to make up their loss in Kanbal by selling dried fruit and buying okkul to sell in Rota--assuming they have enough left to do that. The father got in deep with gambling debts.”

Okkul was a type of flower that grew high on the mountain slopes of Kanbal. They were hardy plants that could thrive even in the middle of Kanbal’s winter. The plants were fairly common and cheap in Kanbal, but were used to make valuable medicines in Rota, so the family’s strategy to acquire okkul here and sell it in Rota wasn’t a bad one.

Their decision to travel in winter was considerably more dubious. Most merchants didn’t travel in winter, so any that did were easy pickings for the bandits on the road. There were also wolves in Rota

and southern Kanbal that attacked caravans occasionally. Balsa had heard of caravans who risked such dangers for profits before, but this caravan was a family. It seemed foolish to risk their lives solely for money.

"They got driven out of their home village for their debts at the beginning of winter," Gol said. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be here. They couldn't just leave the children behind, so the entire family is here." He shrugged. "It's not ideal, but it's how things are."

Balsa picked up on a hidden undercurrent of bitterness in Gol's words. He was no longer a young man, and his son was new and inexperienced. They probably had to take whatever jobs they could get; no one was looking to hire an elderly guard and his greenhorn son. Gol knew as well as she did how dangerous this area was, but he had no choice but to risk traveling through it for the sake of his livelihood.

Balsa was so absorbed in her conversation with Gol that she didn't notice that another man had emerged from the cave until he was very close to Gol. He held a child in his arms. A young woman peeked out at her from behind a tree. The whole family looked emaciated and worn-out.

Balsa sighed. "I'll scout the area first and tell you if it's safe. If it is, we'll accompany you across the gorge. If not, I'll look for another way for us all to cross. Will they be ready to move when you say?"

Gol nodded firmly in agreement with her plan, then faced the destitute merchant family. "You heard the plan," he said. "Balsa is an incredible guard. If we stick with her, we stand a much better chance of crossing the gorge safely."

Balsa smiled a little.

"I'm not sure what the plan is," Chagum whispered in her ear. He hadn't understood all the words that she and Gol had exchanged. "What did you mean by 'ready to move?'"

She had used a guard slang term, 'hoi,' to describe what she'd meant to Gol. She faced Chagum and said, "'Hoi' means that you throw away everything you can't carry and just run. It may be something we have to

do when we reach the gorge, so I asked if Gol was prepared for that. If the merchants toss aside their goods, bandits will slow down to take them. They might not give chase at all. There are more bandit thieves than bandit murderers."

Chagum blinked in surprise. "They're merchants. Can they really throw away everything they own so easily, even to save their own lives?"

Gol's son overheard him and spat. "I think it's stupid. Doing that would be cowardly. Why not stand and fight, for their lives and their goods both? But dad doesn't listen to me about stuff like that."

Gol frowned severely and clapped his son sharply on the ear. "You're the stupid one here. Do you realize who she is? That's Balsa the short spear wielder. She's been a famous guard escort since before you were weaned."

Gol's son shifted his gaze to Balsa. He cleared his throat. "Uh...thank you for agreeing to fight with us. I've told Dohal, the man we're guarding, that we might have to cut and run at any time. It's just something I'd rather not do."

Dohal looked back and forth between Balsa and Gol with a slightly confused expression. "Well, I don't think it's stupid. Any bandits will go for the goods and leave us alone. I can't imagine that most bandits are hard-hearted enough to kill children."

Balsa shook her head a little. "Don't misunderstand me, please. I asked you to be prepared for that situation, but I intend to do my best to protect you, your family and your goods. Even if you need to cut and run, I'll stay back to see how many there are. It might be possible to fight them off. Even if it's not, it's critical for us to know their numbers if we're going to escape successfully."

Dohal and Gol's son looked at her in amazement. Even Chagum seemed surprised.

"If there are a lot of bandits and they're well-armed, the three of us won't be able to fight them off," Balsa said matter-of-factly. "But it may not be as bad as all that. If it turns into a battle, we need to be prepared

for that, as well. It’s winter now, which is a lean time for bandits just like everyone else. They might be miserable and starving and fighting for their lives, just like we are.”

Gol nodded in agreement.

“Anyway, the first thing we need to know is how many there are up ahead. Gol and I will go scout and determine their numbers. If there are only a few and we can fight them off, that’s what we’ll do. We’ll set up a signal to let you know if we’ve fought them off and it’s safe so that you can all follow behind us.”

She paused, searching the faces around her for signs of understanding. When no one asked a question, she continued, “While you’re running, discard a few of your goods along the side of the road.”

Dohal frowned. “Huh? Why? Shouldn't we be able to just take our goods and run?"

Balsa shook her head. "Discarding the goods plays an important role. It makes the bandits think we might turn back or return later to retrieve them, which makes it more difficult for them to pinpoint our location--or destination. If they simply let us run and grab the goods, it would look bad for their leader, who needs to be seen as bold and fearless to be respected." She paused, then went on, "The bandits who paused for the goods will likely be punished. They'll resent that; they might fight back. If all goes well, we might be able to get the bandits to fight each other--in which case, it will turn into a power struggle on their side for who gets to be the next leader."

She frowned. "Of course, if things go badly, they might get desperate and decide to kill us all and steal everything. That would bolster their reputation in the area after people found our bodies. But I don't expect things to go badly--not that badly, at any rate. I believe that discarding the goods is worth the risk."

Gol nodded in agreement. "We'll throw two bags of dried fruit off the cart. I know it affects your livelihood, Dahal, but surely it's worth your family's lives."

Dohal blinked, then swallowed heavily.

Chapter 2 - Tika Ul (Hunting the Hunters)

Balsa and Chagum returned to the road while Dohal and his family prepared to move. "The cliffs at the gorge are too dangerous; it's hard to see. Stay here with Dohal and his family. When you hear me whistle three times, you can all start moving on the road."

Chagum's shoulders tensed with worry. "Do you think Gol and his son will be able to protect that family?"

Balsa smiled faintly. "Gol's survived this long. There must be a reason for that, right? He doesn't always act on the most reliable information, but he's a good guard and a reliable fighter. I wouldn't expect too much from the son, though. He unsheathed his longsword in a grove of trees. If we'd fought, he wouldn't have been able to swing his weapon without hitting his father."

Chagum's face lit up with understanding. The trees did grow close together here. Balsa wouldn't be able to use her spear as effectively; she would probably wind up using a short sword like Gol.

Balsa appeared entirely calm. Chagum guessed that she'd crossed this gorge and protected people from situations just as dangerous as this many times before, which explained her composure. Chagum couldn't seem to sit still; his nerves wouldn't leave him alone.

Dohal's family peeked their faces out of the forest behind him. Balsa faced Chagum and whispered, "That family has said they'll throw their goods away, but I'm not so certain that they actually will. You might have to fight them a little, but make sure they throw those bags off the cart."

Chagum nodded. "I will."

Balsa turned her horse toward the gorge. Gol and his son were waiting for her on the road.

"Be careful!" Chagum called out reflexively as she turned her back to him.

Balsa checked her horse and turned back to look at him. She was smiling. "Just pray that there are no assassins here." She smoothed her expression to seriousness again. "If you hear one long whistle, it means we can't get back here. If that happens, run--run on your own. Leave the family behind and keep yourself safe no matter what."

Chagum didn't respond to that. He looked up at Balsa, his concern still plain on his face.

Balsa turned her horse and followed after Gol and his son.

When she and Gol reached the gorge, the road became so narrow that Balsa's horse had to walk behind his.

"Do you have any idea how these bandits think, or what their numbers are?" Gol asked Balsa.

"Not really, but I can make a few guesses. No one passes this way except for merchants and laborers on their way to Rota, or on their way back home from the south. I can't imagine they're used to hard fighting. I've heard that when it's caravan season, there are about twenty in this group, but it's the off-season now, so there are probably fewer than that." Balsa's eyes rested on a quiver full of arrows on Gol's back. "How good are you with a bow?" she asked.

Gol grinned. "I was raised in Ashal, a region in Rota's northern mountains that runs along a deep riverbed in the mountains. Even children hunt with bows there. Game is usually wild goats and rokkal mountain rats around there. I can't remember a time when I couldn't use a bow. I can't pull as hard as I used to when I was young, but my eyes are as sharp as they ever were. I could probably bring down that eagle flying on the other side of the cliff." He pointed.

Balsa's expression brightened. "Excellent. I'll be their main target. Get behind me and find a good place to pick them off with arrows."

Gol looked at her with an expression of disbelief. "You really intend to hunt the hunters here, don't you? Wouldn't it be wiser to run or sneak past them?"

Balsa smiled. "This is the best place to cross the gorge without losing time. If you'd said you had no confidence with the bow, my plans would

be different."

Gol appeared as nervous as Chagum had when she'd left him. He sank deeply into thought for a while, but then nodded. "I've never tried to ambush the bandits here, but I've had tussles with them before. Even shot a few once. If you're really planning to be the target, I'll support you with everything I've got."

Balsa nodded gratefully. They were nearing the edge of the gorge, so she and Gol dismounted and left the road. Gol's son dismounted as well. They didn't want to risk bringing the horses so close to the cliff edge.

Gol's son was frowning severely; he whispered something in his father's ear. "What does tika ul--hunting the hunters--actually mean?"

"Open your eyes, son. It's exactly what we're planning. Balsa is making herself a tokku--target--to lure them in. It takes great courage to do that, and it's a gamble; we're outnumbered here. But if we survive, we'll have a story to tell to other guards for the rest of our lives."

Balsa faced Gol's son and said, "You'll stay behind to guard the family. We can't leave Dohal and the others undefended while we try to draw them out. Wait for us at a place on the road."

Gol's son slumped his shoulders, but he agreed to do as she said.

"Also..." Balsa tilted her head. "I hate to ask, but I'd like to borrow your bow."

Gol's son seemed surprised at this request, but he handed his bow over to her.

Usal gorge was wide at the top and very narrow at the bottom. Bright light reflected off the snow clinging to the dark stone at the very bottom of the gorge. A river did run through here, but its current was sluggish, especially with winter so far along. The road passed over the gorge via a suspension bridge; it also continued to other crossings in both directions along the cliff. Because the gorge was so wide at the top, the suspension bridge was incredibly long. It was the perfect place to spring a trap or an ambush, since taking carts and animals over that bridge generally took a long time.

Grooves were worn into the cliffs on either side of the gorge; the surfaces were far from even. Balsa saw a few shallow caves that had either been formed naturally or carved out of the soft stone. If the bandits were camped here, they certainly had an advantage. The only good thing about the severity of northern winters, to her mind, was that it would be difficult for bandits or assassins to lie in wait for long periods of time. If they tried that, they might freeze to death.

She still expected there to be regular watches on the gorge and the bridge. There were probably one or two men concealed in the caves below or in the trees on the other side of the bridge, ready to give a signal to the rest of the group at any time. It would be so easy to pick off a caravan with arrows as they crossed the bridge.

Balsa backtracked and guided Dohal, his family, and Chagum to a spot on the road near the cliff. "Wait here," she said. "When you hear three whistles, make a run for the bridge. Send Gol ahead on his horse with the goods you intend to drop, then send forward the rest of the horses. If you're attacked, mount up on the horses and try to run. When you're crossing the bridge, throw away the two bags of dried fruit. Do you understand?" she asked.

Since Gol's son and the horses would ride out ahead, Balsa and Gol lashed the reins of the other horses to Gol's son's to keep them together. It would be easy to scatter the horses by cutting the leads, but they couldn't help that. Dohal seemed very, very nervous, but he understood what the plan was.

Balsa glanced over at Chagum. His eyes were full of single-minded focus and determination. They had to cross Usal gorge. If they didn't, they would lose even more time.

Balsa dismounted and removed her coat so that she could move more easily. She stowed it in her pack. She wrapped her horse's reins around the saddle's pommel, then said, "Include this horse with the others, but leave it free."

Gol tied his own horse to a tree. "I'd prefer to leave mine here. We can come back, maybe, when it's safe. I'll return on my own and catch

up to you." He exchanged a few words with his son, then followed Balsa.

They were ready. Balsa and Gol took up positions at the edge of the gorge and kept watch. There was an enormous clump of bushes on the other side of the bridge that would be perfect to hide behind. "I'll bet there's a cave there," Gol whispered. "They must have planted that bush and all that undergrowth to conceal it."

He was right. Balsa saw thin trails of smoke coming from the direction of the bushes. The bandits were holed up there, waiting for someone to try to cross the bridge. It was even easier to keep watch from where they were than it was from Balsa and Gol's position, because they were on slightly higher ground. Gol turned around and started climbing uphill; he needed to be higher than the bandits if he wanted to pick them off easily with arrows.

Gol's bow was a longbow: capable of firing accurately from very far away. It did, however, take some time to fire. If the bandits managed to swarm him before he reduced their numbers, he'd be in trouble. Balsa certainly hoped that Gol was as good with a bow as he'd said he was.

Well, it's time. Let's do this.

She lost sight of Gol when he passed into a bamboo thicket. She picked up her borrowed quiver and strapped it to her back. Her spear was in her right hand and the bow was in her left. She descended the slope toward the bridge. She had to find some cover for herself so she could shoot. If any of the bandits caught sight of her here, they could pick her off easily.

Balsa heard the bandits whistle signals to one another as she ran. An arrow narrowly missed her shoulder. The archer was close; Balsa paused in place and removed the scabbard from her spear. She heard the sound of more arrows being released nearby and kept running. When she reached a narrow ledge on the cliff that was shielded from most eyes by the undergrowth, she stopped to catch her breath. She heard someone groan and tracked the sound to a bamboo grove. She saw a man up there with a bow in his hand--and an arrow in his back. He tumbled forward over the cliff.

Balsa heard no more arrows whizzing around her. All was silent. She held her breath and tried to sense where the next volley of arrows would come from. Three arrows came flying in her direction at once; she deflected all three with the tip of her spear.

Gol was even more impressive with his bow than he'd stated. He used the position of the arrows aimed at Balsa to shoot down two of the enemy's archers without having to see them. By bad luck, the final archer was behind Balsa, further along the cliff; he had good cover behind a rock formation. Gol's arrows couldn't reach him there.

Balsa narrowly avoided the archer's next arrow, then set aside her spear and drew an arrow from her quiver. She nocked it back and fired at the last archer without an instant of hesitation. She missed. The archer prepared another arrow; she ducked to avoid it, then fired again. She saw her arrow pierce the archer's left shoulder; he gasped and dropped his bow.

More bandits emerged from the rocky area behind the archer; there was almost certainly a cave there. Men screamed and cried out warnings. A man that appeared to be the leader rode toward the cliff on a black horse. He planted himself at the other side of the suspension bridge and drew his sword. Six other riders wearing wolf pelts over their coats surrounded him in a fan shape. Four more tall unmounted men took places near the riders. Two others remained near their leader.

The leader kicked his horse into motion and started to cross the bridge. One other bandit followed. Gol shot at them, but they didn't pause; they deflected his arrows with practiced ease. Balsa set her bow aside, picked up her spear, and ran toward the bandits at top speed. She ran halfway across the bridge and encountered the bandit leader. The bandits on the other side of the bridge got a clear view of Balsa and drew their swords.

The bandit leader raised his sword and was about to cut Balsa down when he lost his grip on his weapon. Balsa brought her spear's point up and sliced off two of the fingers of his sword hand. His fingers and his sword fell over the edge of the bridge and into the gorge. The bandit leader screamed and fell from his horse. His feet caught in the stirrups; his panicking horse started trampling him.

The butt of Balsa's spear struck the other bandit on the bridge below the jawline. He fell from his horse without making a sound. He flailed his arms desperately and held on for dear life to the bridge's rope guardrail.

Balsa whistled three times, giving the others the signal to move up and cross the bridge. She didn't stop for an instant, but kept running across the bridge to deal with the rest of the bandits.

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Dohal and his family were panicked and frozen from fear, but when they heard Balsa's signal, they had no choice but to move. Gol's son was just as frightened as the merchant family and remained still.

"That's the signal!" Chagum said. "Go! Run!" He slapped one of the packhorses on the rear with the grip of his sword. The horse lurched into motion; the others that were lashed to it started moving as well.

Gol's son seemed to return to his senses; he slackened his horse's reins and chased after the packhorses. He had panicked momentarily, but he was focused now. He drew his longsword and held it ready.

Chagum faced Dohal and his family. His face was very pale. He tried to sound confident when he said, "Well then, let's go. We'll use the horses to provide cover. Even if they shoot at us, the horses will shield us, so don't worry. We'll be fine." Chagum unsheathed his own sword, then ran after Gol's son and the horses. Dohal's family hesitated for a few moments, then formed a line and started running behind Chagum.

The cart that the packhorses drew sent snow flying in all directions as Chagum's group descended the slope. Chagum fell back to defend

them from behind; he couldn't see much in front of him due to all the flying snow. Chagum's group drew closer to the bridge, with Gol's son out in front of them. Gol's horse started to cross the bridge. Chagum wasn't far behind him. There was a man in the center of the bridge holding onto the guardrail and screaming, but Chagum paid him no mind. He focused only on progressing forward.

It was almost time to drop the two bags of dried fruit from the cart. The packhorses drawing the cart showed no signs of slowing down. "Dohal! Hoi!" Chagum shouted. Then he kept galloping across the bridge.

Dohal glanced at him. His eyes were full of confusion and doubt. The goods were precious to him; he didn't think he had to sacrifice them for him and his family to escape. Chagum's shout went ignored.

When Chagum reached the other side of the bridge, he drew up sharply on his horse's reins. The horse called Tanda couldn't stop in time without ruining the line of fleeing people and horses, so Chagum directed him a little to the side and dug his heels in.

Balsa was still engaged in combat with the bandits. Chagum watched a rider fall from his horse. Balsa and her horse stood in the center of a group of four men, all holding swords.

Balsa!

Chagum suddenly saw everything clearly, as if it had been preserved in crystal. He knew exactly what he had to do. He kicked Tanda forward and ran after the cart full of Dohal's goods. He cut through the rope holding the goods in place; they spilled out of the cart onto the ground. Then Chagum turned back to Balsa and lined his horse up with hers.

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The leader of the bandits and three of his unmounted men were still standing. No one moved. One other man shifted slightly on the ground, but he couldn't get up. Gol's son, the packhorses and the cart all approached from behind, but Balsa didn't turn to look at them.

But the bandits looked. Balsa knew then that the two bags of dried fruit were behind her, on the ground; everything was going according to plan.

"Balsa!" Chagum called out.

She felled the man in front of her by bringing her spear down on his head, then slashing at his horse's neck. It screamed and panicked, throwing its rider. Balsa galloped to Chagum's side.

Balsa pulled up on her reins and thrust her spear into the ground to hold her horse in place. She turned her horse smartly around to face the few remaining bandits. The leader was wavering; she could tell. He wanted to flee, but he had to stand his ground or lose face with his scant remaining men. She glanced at Chagum, who nodded. The two of them charged their horses past the remaining bandits, following Gol's son, Dohal's family and the wagon.

The bandit leader let them go. One of the bandits tried to chase after them, but the leader shouted, "Are you an idiot? We've got wounded here. We need to tend to them before we chase anyone." He turned to another bandit. "You. Go pick those bags up and see what's inside."

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Gol's son kept his horse galloping ahead of the wagon, packhorses, Dohal, and his family. They ran for a long way; the horses panicked at the battlefield and ran as fast as they could past it. The road was slippery with ice and snow, which helped them go even faster than they'd usually be able to. They picked up speed and couldn't slow down: at this rate, they might tumble into a ditch and die.

Balsa brought her horse up alongside the cart. She spoke to the horses in a soothing voice and reached out with the butt of her spear to pat their necks as gently as she could manage. The horses slowed by degrees. When they finally stopped, their riders dismounted. The horses and riders were both drenched in sweat. It was so cold that their breath was visible.

By the time Gol sneaked past the remaining bandits and caught up with the rest of them, it was growing dark. Gol's son saw him first; he waved. "Dad!"

Gol brought his horse up, then passed a longbow back to his son. His own was strapped to his back. "We're fine now," he said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "The other bandits turned tail and ran. We don't have to worry about them anymore."

Dohal and exchanged relieved glances, but they were shaking--from cold, fear, or some combination of both.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Dohal's wife said. She clutched her young daughter to her chest and bowed to Gol and Balsa over and over again.

Balsa smiled at Gol. "You're an incredible archer. It's really thanks to you that we're all safe."

Gol blushed bright red and laughed. "It was nothing! You were the one who took all the risks. You're better than your reputation gives you credit for. We never would have made it over Usal gorge without you."

Chagum smiled as he looked between Gol and Balsa. Then he felt Dohal's eyes on him and stopped smiling. Balsa noticed Chagum's sudden change in expression and faced Dohal.

Dohal looked at his feet. "I am very grateful to you all for saving us," he said, "but I don't understand why we needed to give them those two bags of fruit. They were done for; they wouldn't have chased us even if we'd kept them on the cart. It's a lot harder for me to pay off my debts without those two bags. I doubt I'll make any profit from this journey at all."

Chagum went pale. Dohal's words angered him, but he also felt sorry that his family would suffer now. Dohal hadn't cut the two bags loose from the wagon; Chagum had. Their suffering was his fault. He opened his own pack to give Dohal and his family something for their trouble. Balsa seized his arm.

"It's true that you lost some of your goods," she said, "but you're also alive. You can work in Kanbal until you have enough to pay off your

debts. Try to think of it that way instead. You'll never make a profit again if you die."

Dohal's expression was tinged with bitterness, but he nodded.

Balsa rode next to Chagum as they continued their journey, looking for a place to make camp. "Do you think it was the wrong decision to cut those two bags free from the cart?" she asked.

He shook his head.

Balsa smiled. "If that's so, there's no need to pay him anything. You did nothing wrong." She put her hand on Chagum's shoulder. "You saved us by doing that. If the bags hadn't been there, the bandit leader would have ordered his men to chase after us. I would have had to fight off all four of them while we ran. I could probably have done it, but I doubt I could have managed it without injuries--to us or the horses. So thank you, Chagum." She smiled again.

"I never expected you to charge up on your horse and give me that distraction. Even seasoned guards can't usually pull off the timing on something like that."

Chagum's lips trembled. He looked like he was about to cry. He and Balsa remained silent for a while, listening to their horses' hooves slush through the snow. Gol and his son lighted torches behind them.

"Do you think there were any assassins mixed in with those bandits?" Chagum asked.

"Nah, those were all Rotans, and they all listened to the same leader. There wasn't more than one faction there; I would have noticed."

Chagum nodded. "We can't keep traveling with Gol and the others for too much longer. We don't want to put them in danger. Bandits and assassins are different. Assassins will cut down the innocent to get to us if they have to."

Balsa looked straight ahead and shrugged. "You're right." The dim outlines of a building appeared in the distance. It was a tahn--a small hut meant to give travelers shelter during winter storms. This would probably be a good place to spend the night. *At least I'll be able to share the watch with Gol for the night.*

She frowned. She felt like she was being watched, but when she turned around, no one was looking at her. She didn't see anyone suspicious on the road or in the woods.

"What's wrong?" Chagum asked. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword.

Balsa shifted in her saddle and stared into the forest. "I feel like someone's watching us."

"Are they following us?"

"I don't think so..." She sighed, then shook her head. They rode on for a little while until they reached the hut. Balsa didn't think she was being watched anymore. "I think we would have sensed something if we were being followed. It's been a long day. My mind might be playing tricks on me."

But Balsa *was* being watched. There was a monkey sitting in the trees behind Balsa and her horse, staring down with a very human expression of curiosity. The monkey's eyes remained fixed on Balsa as she walked away.

Chapter 3 - Ambush

Balsa and Chagum left Dohal and his family at dawn the next day and resumed their journey. They neared Rota's border with Kanbal near midday. They were rounding a gentle turn on the mountain path when Chagum stopped abruptly to catch his breath. Up until now, he'd only ever seen Kanbal's southern mountains through a screen of trees, but now, they towered majestically overhead. His view of the mountains was entirely unobstructed. They were much taller than any mountains he'd ever seen in Rota. Snow dusted summits that looked sharp enough to cut the sky.

"It's the start of the Yusa mountain range," Balsa said quietly.

Chagum squinted from the harsh reflection of the light off the snowy peaks. The Yusa mountains marked the border of Kanbal, Balsa's homeland. They were almost there.

Chagum turned to Balsa and looked her in the eyes. She smiled. "Well, then. Let's go."

They kept moving down the mountain path. Two squat towers appeared in the distance in front of them. The towers were made of the same dark stone common to Rota and Kanbal. There was a scout on top of each tower. All told, there were roughly ten guards on duty here, but this was a general border crossing road, so the guards were fairly lax. Some looked sleepy. There were four men on this side of the border and four on the other, with the two scouts in the towers to either side.

A group of five people were approaching the border from the Kanbal direction; they were probably looking to cross over into Kanbal for work. One of the men in the group rode an emaciated horse. When Balsa and Chagum approached, the guards were milling around a shared fire, trying to keep warm. Some were smoking gazal, a sweet kind of tobacco that grew in Rota.

None of them moved from the fire as Balsa, Chagum, and the group of people from Kanbal approached the border.

Balsa and Chagum passed through the group of guards. One stank so badly of smoke that Chagum wrinkled his nose. He wondered if the man could smell himself, or if he'd gotten used to it. One of the guards, a middle-aged man with a haughty sort of air, peeled off the main group and followed them. Chagum felt his heart beat faster; he followed where Balsa led and tried to appear calm. Four of the guards carried spears that looked a lot like Balsa's. Two of them gave a signal to the one who had followed Balsa; he nodded in acknowledgement.

"Stop your horses," the guard said, "and remove your face coverings. Let's have a look at you."

Balsa and Chagum did as instructed. The guard blinked when he saw Chagum's face. Chagum stayed still and silent, waiting for the guard to say something. His heart pounded so hard that it hurt. The guard exchanged a glance with one of his fellows.

"Can we help you with anything, sir?" Balsa asked.

The guard cleared his throat. "We inspect everyone who comes in from Rota these days. There have been reports that bandits and thieves have been trying to cross the border." His tone was rude. "You can advance as far as the towers. We'll check your baggage there."

The guard faced one of his younger comrades and called out, "Hey! Follow these two and check their stuff." He returned to the fire. The young guard he'd called out to followed Balsa and Chagum a little way forward, then asked them to stop again. He checked their baggage in a perfunctory way, but Balsa felt like there was something off about the guard. She was about to relax when he started to check everything much more thoroughly, as if he was looking for something in particular. Even after it was clear that he'd found nothing, he continued to make a pretext of searching through their bags. It was almost like he was trying to slow them down. When the sleeve of the guard's uniform slipped a little as he searched her bag, Balsa saw that he was wearing a silver bracelet on his arm.

At long length, the baggage inspection was over. "Fine," the guard said. "You're free to go."

The guards allowed Balsa and Chagum to pass. Chagum was so relieved that he was a little lightheaded from it. They rode to the other side of the towers, expecting to see more guards there, but there were none to be seen. They kept riding for a while in uneasy silence.

"That place was weird," Chagum whispered.

"Those guards sell information on who's carrying valuables in exchange for a cut," Balsa muttered.

"What?!" Chagum was shocked.

"I saw a silver bracelet on that guard's arm. Border guards aren't paid well enough for them to afford something like that."

"If they sell information...do you think they'll tell anyone about us? For money?" Chagum asked.

"Possibly. I don't doubt they've helped arrange ambushes--to help them take their share of whatever valuables they're owed."

"And you think that Talsh assassins might pay them to do that?"

"I'm not certain they have, but it's better to assume that they have and be wrong than to stumble right into a trap."

The wound on Chagum's face tightened with pain. He remembered that he'd been too slow to avoid the last Talsh assassin's blade. His shame at failing to defend himself felt worse than the pain of his injury. "What should we do?" he asked.

"We'll keep riding until they can't see us anymore, then leave the road. We can take a brief detour through the forest and try to lose any pursuers. Then we'll tie the horses in the woods and lie in wait near the road, waiting for them to pass us by. We don't want to run into them on the road. If they don't find us, they may leave us alone."

Chagum looked confused for a moment, but then he nodded. "I see. If they sell information, it's possible that their contacts will figure out who we are. We might be brought back to the towers in that case. But

since we know that's a possibility, we might be able to hide--or spring our own ambush."

"If all goes well, maybe," Balsa said.

They were rounding a turn that would take them out of visual range of the fortress when a chill went up Balsa's spine. She pulled up on her reins and said sharply, "Chagum, get down!"

Chagum complied immediately, but he didn't sense any danger. Something glinted just above his head and struck his horse in the neck. Tanda screamed and fell over. Balsa leaped off her own horse and planted herself flat on the snowy ground like a wooden plank. Chagum followed her down, getting a faceful of snow. Balsa held her spear in her right hand and directed Chagum, through gestures, to hide in the underbrush at the side of the road.

Two arrows landed in the snow behind Chagum as he rolled into the underbrush. Shadowy figures emerged from behind trees. They wore light gray and blended in almost perfectly with the snowy forest landscape. Balsa looked around and tried to determine how many assassins there were.

Five. Shit.

Balsa gritted her teeth. These weren't bandits; they wouldn't allow Balsa or Chagum to simply run past them.

"Run into the woods and don't look back," Balsa whispered in Chagum's ear. She gripped her spear and faced the advancing assassins. They scattered as they approached. Four cornered Balsa while a fifth locked his gaze on Chagum and prepared to give chase.

Balsa cut two assassins down in front of her with blinding speed. They collapsed to the snowy ground; the face of one of the assassins was bleeding profusely. While the two others cornering her blinked in astonishment, she moved to cut off the assassin who had targeted Chagum. Her spear's shaft struck him sharply across his body, making him grunt and retreat backward. Balsa rushed at him and brought her knee into his side. She heard the sound of his ribs breaking as she

stepped back. He collapsed to the ground, clutching at his chest; he wasn't able to regain his feet.

Balsa picked up the injured man and threw him at the assassins running at her. The injured assassin tumbled to the ground in front of his comrades, briefly tripping one of them. The other assassin sprang at Balsa rapidly, bringing his sword down in a powerful slash. Balsa avoided the cut and brought her spear up to strike his face, but he dodged.

Balsa felt sudden sharp pain in her side and realized she'd been cut. She wasted no time: before she could be injured further, she bent all the way down, seized the assassin's leg and broke it at the knee.

The assassin whose face she'd cut was sneaking up behind her. He brought his wide-bladed, curved sword down on Balsa's back.

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Chagum ran desperately through the woods. He didn't want to waste Balsa's sacrifice; she was working so desperately to buy him time. He set his jaw and kept running over the slightly slippery ground. The trees became older and thicker as he ran; they grew closer together, making it harder to run. He heard someone approaching from behind, but didn't turn around to look. He kept running until he reached a clump of trees on top of a hill. He was about to sprint through the trees when his foot caught on something under the snow.

He felt himself fall, but he didn't stop moving: he landed and rolled forward as fast as he could. He reached a clearer space and got to his feet. The face of the assassin pursuing him was clearly visible when he stood up; the man had almost completely closed the distance between them.

The assassin had a backhanded grip on his sword hilt, which brought the edge of his weapon that much closer to Chagum. Chagum drew his own sword and blocked the assassin's incoming slash. The assassin

raised his sword again; Chagum took a step back and dodged the blade, then barreled forward into the assassin's legs.

The assassin fell to the ground, face-up, still clutching his weapon. He tried to slash at Chagum's back.

Someone kicked the assassin so hard and fast in the knee that Chagum couldn't track their movements. The man briefly lost control of his weapon; Chagum felt a shallow slash to his side and gasped. There was blood dripping down Chagum's face, but it was hard to tell if it was his own or if it had fallen off of the assassin's sword.

The assassin didn't move. Chagum lifted his arm speculatively and disarmed him; there was no reaction. The assassin's arm dropped with a heavy thunk into the snow.

Someone seized Chagum's arm from behind. They spun him around, a little roughly for the circumstances, and wiped the blood off his face. "Are you injured?" they asked. The person who had saved him was a woman--definitely not Balsa. His eyes widened in shock as he recognized her.

"Shihana?" She was one of the Kashal, magic weavers and spies who worked for the royal family of Rota. Her right eye was covered by a white eyepatch. There was blood on the short sword she carried.

"Shihana, where is Balsa?" he asked. "Balsa!"

"She's probably fine," Shihana said with a slight smile. "There are more Kashal here than just me, you know."

Chagum took a deep breath, then started running back to the road. Shihana gave a signal; she and several other Kashal started running after Chagum. Shihana's monkey leaped from tree to tree above them, keeping pace with the runners. When they reached the road, the monkey leaped directly onto Shihana's shoulder.

Chagum hoped that Balsa was all right; he didn't want to search the battlefield and find out that the worst had happened. There were several people on the road ahead of him: some were archers; others carried swords, but he didn't see Balsa among them.

"Balsa!" he called out. "Balsa!"

Balsa limped out of the tree cover near the road, clutching her knee with one hand and her wounded side with the other. When she caught sight of Chagum, she stood up straight and asked, "Are you all right? Were you hurt?" She came all the way up to him and pushed back his hair, which had fallen into his face while running.

“I’m fine,” Chagum said. “The blood is the assassin’s.” He clasped her hands. “You’re the one who’s hurt.”

Her left hand was bleeding severely. She looked down at it with a slight frown. “It’s fine. The wound is shallow.”

Her face was deathly pale. Chagum didn’t notice that her side was wounded as well--and it was bleeding far more than her hand. She relaxed a little when she realized that Chagum was safe: enough to understand that she would need treatment soon. She broke out in a cold sweat and shivered violently. It hurt to breathe; her vision went white around the edges.

Chagum was speaking to her, but his voice was getting farther and farther away. She blinked a few times and tried to focus, but her efforts only made her head ache. She fell unconscious without realizing it as she fought to breathe.

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Balsa awoke when she felt something cold on her face. Chagum’s blurry face came into focus above her. Her head was resting on his knees; he had just placed a damp cloth on her forehead. It seemed that she hadn’t been unconscious for very long. They were still on the road; she saw Kashal surrounding them.

“Are you all right?” Chagum whispered.

Balsa nodded and tried to get up.

“Don’t move yet,” Chagum said. “You might pass out again. Just rest. The Kashal have a camp in these woods; they’re making a litter to carry

you now. Try to be patient." He said all this in a rush, as if he was expecting Balsa to try to interrupt him.

Balsa shook her head a little and lay back down. She pressed both hands against the wound in her side to help stop the bleeding.

"I don't need a litter," she said.

"The litter's coming," Shihana said. "Stop being a stubborn child and wait for it." She was standing behind Balsa and Chagum; Balsa could barely see her from this angle. "If your wounds go bad or you bleed out, you'll never make it to the capital to see the king."

She was surprised to see the Kashal here, assisting them against the Talsh spies as if they'd known exactly where the attack would come. And she'd never expected to see Shihana, of all people, ever again. Balsa had cut out Shihana's right eye. She looked for some sign of hatred or resentment on Shihana's face, but saw none.

When the litter came, Chagum helped Balsa stand up. She bowed her head to the Kashal. "You saved our lives. Thank you." Shihana gave a signal to her comrades that were bearing the litter; Balsa lay down on it without a fuss. The Kashal picked her up and carried her to their camp deeper into the woods.

As they traveled, Chagum realized that the corpses of the fallen Talsh assassins were gone. The Kashal must have cleaned up the battlefield and dumped the bodies somewhere so that they wouldn't be discovered easily. A chill went down his spine. Kashal were spies and assassins, too. He was glad they were on his and Balsa's side.

Balsa probably hadn't killed any of the Talsh assassins that she'd felled, but since their bodies were gone, Chagum had to assume that the Kashal had found the injured assassins and finished them off.

The Kashal served the royal family of Rota. From their perspective, Talsh assassins were enemies of the kingdom and deserved no consideration or mercy. If the Kashal had let them live, they would have certainly caused more trouble down the road.

Chagum understood that. He kept his eyes fixed on Shihana's back and kept moving. He couldn't control his shivering, or the slight

trembling in his hands.

He had traveled with Shihana and the Kashal before. The Tohasa clan had rescued him from lord Suan's palace in southern Rota after he'd been captured. The Tohasa clan were generally kind and easy-going; traveling with them had been pleasant and almost fun. But then Shihana's band of Kashal had caught up to them on their way to Prince Ihan's castle, and the entire mood of the journey had completely changed.

The Kashal who served Shihana were ruthlessly efficient in their movements and actions. They were also smart and anticipated any potential enemy's moves and strategies before they happened. Chagum was grateful for their protection, but he found himself wishing for the kinder, gentler mood that had marked the beginning of his journey with the Tohasa clan's Kashal. The Kashal that served Shihana were far too intimidating to ever be considered friendly.

I guess they have to be, since they spy on and assassinate the King of Rota's enemies.

He suddenly remembered his father's Hunters: eight warriors who assassinated the Mikado's enemies in secret. Jin had always felt sorry for him and protected him--even against orders--but he knew that even Jin was capable of killing ruthlessly, without mercy. The Mikado and the King of Rota both ruled their nations and made use of assassins to protect their power.

Chagum still had an assassin's blood drying on his face. He brushed his hand against his cheek, then swallowed. He remembered picking up the man's arm and dropping it--realizing that he was dead. His shivering became so intense that he couldn't stop it, but he wasn't cold. He reached out his hand to Balsa, who lay on her litter next to him.

Balsa grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

Her hands felt warm; her grip was strong. That was reassuring. He kept his hand in Balsa's all the way to the Kashal's camp in the forest.

Chapter 4 - Ihan's Letter

It took a long time to reach the Kashal's camp. Chagum felt his anxiety building up with every step he took away from the road. The Kashal escorting him and Balsa kept going until they reached a rocky area. Chagum saw no signs of a camp anywhere.

A man emerged from between two rocks and brushed snow off his head. More followed and showed Balsa and Chagum into an underground cave. There were a few fires lit near places where the Kashal had drilled holes for ventilation. Most of the Kashal in the cave wore blankets and furs over their coats.

The Kashal carrying Balsa's litter brought her into the cave and set her down near a fire. There was a short, middle-aged woman standing before the fire who bent over Balsa with an expression of concern.

"Leave her here for a while," she said to Chagum. "I'll let you know when I've finished treating her wounds."

Chagum nodded and went farther into the cave, which was separated by rocky outcroppings that acted a little like walls between rooms. Some men were making a meal over another fire. Chagum saw Shihana standing near the meal fire with her arms folded; he waved and walked over to her.

"I forgot to thank you earlier," he said. "You saved our lives. I'll never thank you enough."

Shihana smiled a little and shrugged.

"Maybe it's an odd question," Chagum said, looking at the Kashal gathered in groups around the fires and the ventilation holes, "but why is there a camp here? You're pretty far north."

"Prince Ihan ordered us to follow you," she said. "We're supposed to do whatever it takes to get you safely to the border. We found the

guards who were supposed to be protecting you dead and assumed the worst until we managed to pick up your trail."

Chagum's expression darkened. "I was attacked by another assassin; those guards were cut down. If Balsa hadn't been there, I would have died."

Shihana nodded. "We found the assassin as well and put two and two together. As for this attempt, it was double-pronged. The assassins were planning to let you fall into the hands of the bandits at Usal gorge--and if that attempt failed, they'd be waiting for you here.

"There were no assassins mixed in with the bandits at the gorge, so we sneaked around them and made camp here, waiting for the enemy to show themselves."

Chagum blinked. "That's...impressive."

Shihana shrugged. "I'd plan more or less the same way if I wanted to kill you." Shihana already understood the basics of all of Talsh's plans and strategies.

"You must have known we'd have to fight the bandits," Chagum said. "Why didn't we see you at the gorge?"

"Oh, we were there." Her lips puckered in a slight smile. "Just in secret, hiding out near the cliffs. If it seemed like you were actually in trouble, we would have come out to help, but you had things well in hand, so we didn't bother."

Chagum suddenly remembered that Balsa had felt she was being watched on the night they'd fought the bandits at the gorge.

Shihana's monkey was sitting on her shoulder. She patted his head fondly and said, "We found out that the Talsh assassins were ingratiating themselves with the border guards, using promises of wealth. We used the time it took for them to do that to make camp. The assassins attacked the moment you were out of sight of the guard towers. We were concealed near the road, but we assumed they'd wait slightly longer before springing their ambush. I'm sorry we were wrong."

The woman treating Balsa's wounds called out, "I'm done treating her. You can come sit with her if you like."

Chagum glanced at Shihana--their conversation wasn't over--but she waved him off. Chagum returned to the warm and somewhat isolated space in the cave where Balsa lay stretched out underneath a pile of furs and blankets. She turned toward Chagum when he approached. She was still pale from blood loss, but she was smiling.

"Balsa, are you all right?" Chagum asked.

She nodded firmly. "No need to worry. I'll get a solid night of sleep and be good as new." She looked at the woman who'd treated her injuries. "She's a good herbalist. Not as good as Tanda, but I don't know of anyone else who even comes close."

The woman's eyebrows lifted slightly in confusion. "You're the oddest patient I've ever had--in a good way, though. When you were brought in, I didn't think you'd survive, but you're already conscious and eating. I've never seen anything like it--and I've treated a lot of injuries in my time." She was middle-aged, though not old, and had an air of clear competence.

Chagum and Balsa looked at one another and laughed. "Balsa is used to being injured, so she has a friend who treats her injuries," Chagum said by way of partial explanation. "For her to say that you're only a worse healer and herbalist than he is a serious compliment."

Chagum felt someone at his shoulder and turned to see Shihana. The doctor saw her as well; she gathered up her supplies and bloody rags, then stood up. There was a bit of bloody twine in with the rest of it that Balsa extended her hand toward.

"I need that," she said.

The doctor nodded. "You said that before. Is it lucky? Anyway, I know you want it. I won't throw it away; it'll still be here when you wake up in the morning." She left.

Shihana crouched down next to Chagum and gave Balsa a once-over. Chagum had heard about Balsa and Shihana's terrible fight when they'd met before, but he'd been so grateful to the Kashal for their help that

he'd completely forgotten about that before now. The air of tension between Balsa and Shihana was sharp enough to cut.

Something tapped Chagum in the shoulder. It was a metal tube with a lid; Shihana was holding it out to him. "This is a letter from Prince Ihan," Shihana said. "He asked me to deliver it when we finally caught up to you."

Chagum accepted the tube and popped the lid off of it. There was a letter written on parchment inside. Chagum unfurled the parchment and read:

In the name of the King of Rota, and possessing his full legal authority, I, Prince Ihan, swear that I will accept any proposed alliance with the King of Kanbal that is negotiated by Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo.

Crown Prince Chagum has my full understanding and support. His land is being overrun by the Talsh empire. Rota and Kanbal uniting in alliance is the best way for both countries to avoid the same fate. We are the rulers and leading diplomats of the northern continent; it wouldn't be fitting for us to give in to invaders without a fight.

I consider the King of Kanbal to be an honorable man who is more courageous than he believes. He will always make the right decision for his people.

Chagum's heart beat faster as he read the letter. It was affixed with the royal seal of Rota embossed in red wax. "This letter is probably meant to help convince the King of Kanbal," he said.

"Prince Ihan sincerely desires an alliance with Kanbal," Shihana said. "But there is always a chance that Kanbal will ally itself with Talsh. We don't know what Kanbal wants at this stage. I expect you will learn what the sentiment is toward Talsh when you reach Kanbal's royal palace."

Chagum nodded at Shihana. Rota was embroiled in civil war. It was possible that the King of Kanbal wouldn't want to risk a military alliance with Rota when its current politics were so unstable.

I guess I understand why Prince Ihan wants me to be the messenger. If New Yogo and Rota are destroyed--by Talsh or other means--then Kanbal will be next.

Chagum hadn't given up on saving his own people. Reading between the lines, he didn't think that Prince Ihan had, either. Together, he, Prince Ihan and the King of Kanbal could save the northern continent. It wasn't too late to save everyone.

"I understand," Chagum said. "Prince Ihan doesn't want Kanbal's help to resolve the civil war, but to save the continent from being invaded from the outside. I'll be sure to emphasize that when I meet with the King of Kanbal. The best form of alliance for both countries would be a military agreement to repel the Talsh."

Shihana bowed from the waist. "You are as remarkable as Prince Ihan described, Crown Prince Chagum. The words in his letter are completely true. He believes that if anyone can succeed in making the northern content unite against the Talsh, it would be you." Her eyes shone with emotion. "The northern continent is like a ship, attacked from all sides by the wind and waves. It will take all of us to save it from sinking.

"I believe that if Kanbal agrees to a military alliance, the King can send his forces to northern Rota to muster. The southern clan lords might stand down before the fighting starts when they are confronted with such superior might. But even if they don't, preserving the continent's independence is the most important goal."

Chagum nodded at Shihana. "I'm willing to risk anything, including my life, to make sure that this alliance succeeds. In exchange, I want Prince Ihan's help in saving my own nation as well."

Shihana blinked. "I'm not authorized to make any promises like that on Prince Ihan's behalf."

Chagum shook his head a little. "I didn't mean to imply that I require an answer now. Please tell Prince Ihan my request the next time you see him, then send me his reply. I am headed to the royal palace of Kanbal; I will likely be there, or nearby, for quite some time."

Shihana's eyes were as cold and sharp as ice. "We don't know how your meeting with the King of Kanbal will go," she said. "Until we do, we--"

"--I understand," Chagum interrupted. "I almost forgot that you're Kashal, and can send and receive information by way of animals, so we can be in relatively close contact at any time. I don't want Rota to destroy itself in civil war any more than you do. I still think I can propose an alliance to the King of Kanbal that would keep Rota on roughly equal terms. That would be easier if the conflict in Rota is resolved quickly, or if the situation never breaks out into open war.

"All I'm asking for in return for brokering this alliance is for Prince Ihan to provide aid to my people in New Yogo. He's a generous man who understands the value of his own people; I'm certain he'll agree to my request."

Shihana shook her head. "What goes on in New Yogo isn't Prince Ihan's problem; it's yours." She folded her arms, then added a perfunctory, "I apologize for my rudeness." A pause. "But it's still true.

"Consider your position," Shihana said. "You are a diplomat for New Yogo, but you have no authority to govern your nation or to speak for it. All of that power belongs to your father. Any agreement or promise that Prince Ihan makes to you would not be enforced and would be, essentially, meaningless."

Chagum opened his mouth to protest when he heard footsteps behind him.

"So are you going to tell him to kill his father?" Balsa asked. "If authority is what he needs, that's where he'd get it." She was staring, hard-eyed, at Shihana. "New Yogo is on the verge of destruction. Chagum is doing his best to save it. Turning aside from his current course by seizing power in New Yogo wouldn't help save anyone.

"Besides," Balsa said, "you're not authorized to speak for your king or Prince Ihan, either. You just said as much yourself. Chagum asked you to deliver a message with a request. Why not let Prince Ihan choose how he wants to respond?"

Balsa and Shihana glared at one another for a long moment. Finally, Shihana stood up and said, “Fine. I’ll tell Prince Ihan your intentions and relay your request, Crown Prince Chagum. You’ll receive our reply via messenger before you leave Kanbal’s royal palace.” She bowed her head slightly, then frowned.

She seemed unwilling to go; she started at Balsa with an icy glare for more than a minute before turning on her heel and going deeper into the cave. The air of intimidating tension sparked between Shihana and Balsa as she left.

Chagum read over Prince Ihan’s message again, then glanced up at Balsa.

“I see that Shihana hasn’t outgrown threats,” she said with a bitter smile. “I’m sure she still wants to kill me, even after all this time. She hasn’t forgotten that I stood in her way when she wanted to use the god Talhamaya’s power to strengthen Prince Ihan’s position.”

Chagum frowned a little. “Talhamaya comes from Nayugu, right? You’ve talked a little about her before. I thought she was utterly terrifying.”

“She is,” Balsa said. “She’s some kind of spirit that loves the smell of blood. Numbers don’t mean anything to her. If all the Talsh troops landed and attacked right now, she might be capable of obliterating them all.” She paused. The look she gave Chagum was serious and intense. “Do you want it? That kind of power?”

Chagum considered her question for a long while. He nodded to himself. “In principle, yes. Anything capable of wiping out an army that large while keeping my people safe is something I’d want. But in practice, no. If I used that power even once and saw the violence, destruction and loss of life it caused--even on the enemy side--I would hate myself forever.”

Chagum remembered one of the guards that Prince Ihan had sent with him from his palace. The man had been so proud of his little daughter. He’d been laughing and smiling about her during the attack--

but then he'd been cut down. Chagum's shock in that moment was engraved on his memory forever.

And that was just one man. No war stopped with the killing of a single person. If he used a power like Talhamaya's against his enemies, the war wouldn't end. Talsh wouldn't stop--and the war would become an endless cycle of bloodshed and killing. Chagum didn't want that. He couldn't daydream of powerful weapons to use against the Talsh. Even if a weapon like that fell into his hands, he couldn't possibly use it to save New Yogo.

Securing an alliance between Rota and Kanbal was the first step. New Yogo could be incorporated into the alliance later. The collected nations of the northern continent could, with any luck at all, repel the first wave of Talsh forces. He had a plan, and he wouldn't diverge from it without a very good reason.

Being decided on a course of action didn't silence all his doubts. He'd missed the possible advantages in Kanbal and Rota becoming allies without New Yogo until Hugo had pointed it out. It was possible that there was a better way to save his nation that he hadn't considered. He probably spent more time thinking about that than he should: lost in possibilities and contingencies.

He had chosen this path because he'd wanted to save as many innocent lives as possible, but so many people had already died protecting him--and more would die in the future, many more, because he wasn't able to stop the Talsh from coming. Rota had its own troubles on top of Talsh. Any force that came to New Yogo's aid would already be exhausted from travel and fighting.

And if the worst should happen--if Talsh conquered Rota and formed an alliance with Kanbal--then New Yogo would be beset by enemies on all sides. He had to meet with his father face-to-face before anything that terrible could happen.

Chagum covered his face with his hands. He couldn't control his turbulent thoughts. What was he supposed to do next? "If I kill my

father," he whispered with tears streaming down his cheeks, "New Yogo's people will never agree to follow me."

Balsa pulled Chagum into a gentle hug. She settled her arms around him and squeezed. He pressed his face into her shoulder and wept.

Chapter 5 - Coming Home

The next morning, Balsa and Chagum stood outside the Kashal's underground cave, alone. The Kashal had broken camp and departed sometime before dawn--including Shihana. Only the woman who served as Balsa's doctor remained behind. She prepared them a breakfast of honey, bam, and rakal, a traditional Rotan alcoholic beverage made with mare's milk.

When Chagum asked the doctor where the other Kashal had gone, she said, "The southern clan lords are in open revolt, so they've returned to Rota. I was asked to stay behind and tell you. You shouldn't have any more trouble until after you cross the border." She took a sip of warmed-up rakal and smiled.

"The road is safe," she said, "but I'll be remaining nearby, watching, for a little while--just to be sure. You should be on your way after you've eaten and rested. I can't travel with you--imagine how strange it would look for a Kanbalese, Yogoese and Rotan person to be traveling on the road together."

Balsa smiled a little. Kanbal was an insular sort of country ruled by impoverished clan lords that supported an equally impoverished king. It was not a populous or prosperous nation and received few visitors apart from trade. The capital contained the royal palace and was the largest city, but by the standards of the continent, even that city was small--and there were no larger ones. There were trade markets called lassal, but these were rare and never stuck around for very long.

Kanbalese people lived in clans, so all outsiders were distrusted on principle. Those who showed up to trade at the lassal markets and traveling merchants tended to be more tolerant. It was said that rumors traveled faster than horses in Kanbal.

"How far is it to the capital city from here?" Chagum asked.

“We’re in the Muga clan’s territory now,” Balsa said. “The King’s province is directly to the west. So it’s not far, but the road is difficult--it cuts through more mountains. I think we can probably make it in about a week. It’s almost the new year; I hope we can make it before then.”

The doctor glanced over at them. “You can’t possibly think of leaving today? Your wounds aren’t healed yet!”

Balsa smiled. “They’re just flesh wounds. They hurt a little, but they’ve stopped bleeding. I’ll be fine.”

The woman shook her head and muttered to herself in Rotan. She changed Balsa’s bandages, then gave her medicines to use to help her heal faster. She also helped Chagum pack for the journey; she insisted that Balsa should rest for as long as possible. The Kashal had prepared their horses for departure before they’d left camp as well.

Balsa and Chagum mounted up and got back to the road. There was no sign of the Kashal woman doctor anywhere, though they assumed she was nearby. Smoke from the Kashal's camp rose faintly into the sky, then disappeared.

They were traveling in Muga clan territory. They decided to stop at a lassal, one of Kanbal's large markets, before nightfall. While climbing up a steep mountain path, Tanda's footing failed; he slipped, causing Chagum to cry out.

The horse regained his balance. Balsa extended her hand to help Chagum right himself in the saddle. Early evening light bathed the mountains in a soft red glow. Chagum took deep breaths and took in the view to help calm himself.

"Alam lai la," Balsa said.

"Huh?" Chagum asked.

"It's Yonsa dialect," Balsa said. "We call beautiful mountain sunsets like this 'alam lai la.' The sun loves the mountains, who are the mother of the Kanbalese people. The sun shows its affection to our mother before going to sleep for the night, as it has for a thousand years."

Chagum smiled at her. "If Tanda, uh, 'showed his affection,' would you blush red like this?" He was teasing. Balsa let him go and put some separation between their horses.

The lassal came into view some time later. Chagum squinted down at it and said, "Huh. That's it?"

"Yes," Balsa said, "and don't make that face while you're there. Nothing in Kanbal is all that big. This is one of the larger markets in the area, believe it or not."

The lassal was cradled by the foot of the mountain; it seemed almost to be carved from it. Chagum saw a dozen or so squat stone buildings with ten hide tents erected among them. It didn't look like a large market at all by New Yogo's standards.

"Look there," Balsa said. She pointed.

There were more stone buildings clustered above the initial set of the dozen he'd seen; they were built on higher ground. Both sets of buildings were surrounded by walls on every side. Chagum saw smaller buildings that looked like they were for animals or livestock on the higher level.

"That's a village," Balsa said. "The people graze their goats outside the walls. The smaller buildings are for livestock and herders."

Chagum stared at the huts. Everything seemed so small and crudely constructed; the village seemed to be very poor. "What are herders?" Chagum asked.

"They're not part of Kanbal's clans," Balsa said. "They're much shorter than Kanbalese people. Most adult herders don't get taller than waist level on me. They may look small, but they know more about the mountains than anyone. They pass messages to one another over long distances by singing and whistling."

Balsa knew about the herders and their special connection to the Mountain King, but that wasn't something to be discussed lightly, even with Chagum. There was a dark world under the Yusa mountains, as dense and complex as a spider web in the darkness; few people had ever been there to tell people of what they'd seen.

Balsa and Chagum struggled down the mountain path into the village. The stores and food stalls were open when they arrived; men and women stood outside their tents or the stone buildings, offering goods for sale. The market wasn't crowded. It was obvious that some of the stores doubled as houses. The people manning stores and stalls fixed their gazes on Chagum and Balsa with hungry eyes.

In Rota and Kanbal, the size of this village wouldn't be enough to warrant calling it a market, but Balsa knew that there were no other places to shop and resupply for a far distance in any direction. She and Chagum dismounted and walked through the village until they reached a building that had a lamp lit inside.

"This is an inn," Balsa whispered to Chagum. "We can rest here tonight."

The inn had a small stable attached to it, so they brought their horses there. A sullen man standing near the fire accepted the reins of their horses without saying a word.

Balsa and Chagum approached the inn's large doorway. There was a whistling sound coming from somewhere inside. Chagum stopped dead in his tracks. That whistle was the same kind he'd heard upon arriving home at the palace from the mountain villa, or from his travels. He was absolutely certain that it was the same sound.

Chagum stood in the doorway as if he'd frozen to the spot. Balsa shrugged and pushed the door open. She smelled smoke from cooking fires; the inn must be preparing to serve dinner. The whistling sound became louder and carried a clear tune like music.

The small entrance hall was directly attached to the dining area, without as much as a wall separating them. A large fire crackled in a hearth set into a stone wall. There was a large pot of stew bubbling over it that smelled wonderful. Three people who appeared to be guests sat in chairs near the fire.

The whistle that Chagum had thought he'd heard was a high-pitched flute. A woman of around forty was playing it in the dining area. When he looked more closely at the woman and the guests, he was shocked: all of them were Yogoese.

One of the women got up from her chair and called out in greeting. "Hi! You're Yogoese like us--whereabouts are you from?"

A Kanbalese man with a shaggy beard waved Balsa and Chagum further inside. "Now, then, come in. It's freezing out there. Come by the fire and sit down."

Two tall women entered the dining area from an interior room that was probably the kitchen; they carried trays and chairs. The women looked at Chagum and smiled.

"Well, more Yogoese guests," one of the women said. "We've seen a lot of them since the rumors started spreading around. Where did you hear about us? Oram's store?" she asked.

Chagum blinked and shrank back in confusion. Balsa put her hand on his shoulder.

“We’re not here because of rumors,” Balsa said. “We stopped in the lassal to get supplies and realized the sun was going down, so we decided to stay at the closest inn.”

The women and the other Yogoese guests all gave Balsa disbelieving looks. The bearded man’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “Well, I suppose this is all just a fortunate coincidence. We’ve got good food and entertainment here, as you see.”

Balsa nodded. Chagum removed his boots and approached the fire. The bearded man lifted the lid from the pot of stew and inhaled.

“Mmm...it’s suchal!” Chagum said. Suchal was a stew made from bird meat and vegetables.

The other Yogoese guests smiled at him. “You must be starving for Yogoese food,” the bearded man said. “I’m still not used to the yak milk smell.” He crinkled his nose.

A Kanbalese woman with an air of authority snorted through her nose. “You shouldn’t badmouth Kanbalese food,” she said. “Especially when you’re in Kanbal.” She glanced at Balsa. “Well, these poor fools went out and made their own food to share, which suits us fine. They bought all the ingredients and did the word, so we can’t complain.”

The guests and inn workers all introduced themselves, one after another. The Yogoese travelers were all from Kosenkyo. The bearded man was a merchant at a dry goods store; the flute player was a traveling performer and the slight man with her was her husband.

"We got stuck here after the Mikado closed the borders," the bearded man said with a bitter smile. "She came here to play in the Kanbalese capital for a festival with her husband. I came to meet my first grandchild."

"Your first grandchild?" Chagum asked.

The bearded man shrugged. "My daughter married a laborer from Kanbal who works in New Yogo during most of the year and comes

back home in the winter. I tried to talk her out of it, but she's married into the Muga clan now, so there's no help for it. I got the news that my grandson had been born and decided to visit. I thought I'd be able to go home, but..."

He folded his arms over his chest. "I didn't care for living here at first, but my son-in-law's family are friendly and welcoming people. But they're poor, and I don't expect them to put me up forever. I work at this inn and help with the cooking so that I can bring extra food home to make ends meet."

The flautist and her husband nodded. "We don't expect to get by on charity, either," the flautist said in fluent Kanbalese. "We do the cleaning and the washing at this inn in exchange for lodging. I could probably get work as an entertainer in the capital, but it's far from the border, which would make it harder to go home when the borders reopen. Besides, there are a lot of Yogoese people around here who got stranded, so we're in good company." She smiled. "Everyone at the lassal is so nice. I think this is a good place to spend the winter."

The two tall Kanbalese women that helped run the inn exchanged little smiles. Their guests disparaged Kanbal's food and cut into the work that they could be paid to do, but they also thought that their guests were kind enough. One of the women sighed.

"We can't really afford to take in more people over winter, but we can't let all the stranded people freeze and starve, either. It's a terrible and cruel thing, being thrown out of your own country by the king."

Chagum ducked his head.

The bearded man frowned, then said in halting Kanbalese, "New Yogo doesn't have a king, but a Mikado. He's descended from a god, Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens." The man's expression became grave. "I think it's true. I'm just a merchant and can't possibly fathom the Mikado's plans and intentions, but I suspect that the borders were closed to protect the country from Talsh spies and invasion. If that's the case, then those of us who are outside the country for the war will be spared its violence and bloodshed. That's not a bad thing at all. Maybe

the Mikado was thinking of that when he imposed such harsh restrictions for crossing the border."

Chagum's lips trembled. Balsa gripped his shoulder and squeezed. Chagum faced the bearded man and said calmly, "I think so, too. I think the stew's done--is it really all right to let it boil for so long?"

The bearded man immediately flew into a panic. "Ah! Oh no!" He hastily removed the pot from the fire.

The flautist addressed Balsa. "Excuse me, but who are you? Where did you come from?"

"We just arrived from Rota," Balsa said. "I'm a bodyguard and caravan escort. This young man's father is merchant that deals in furs and leather. He wanted to follow me and learn to become a bodyguard after I finished up a job for his father, but I refused. By bad luck, he was traveling with his father and another guard in a caravan. The caravan was attacked by bandits and almost everyone was killed, including his father. So he's with me now."

Everyone looked at Chagum with saddened and sympathetic eyes.

"So, that cut on your face..." the bearded man said.

Balsa nodded. "The bandits wounded him. Fortunately, the wound isn't deep. I found him and managed to treat it quickly. Anyway, we travel together now. He has a strong will to learn, which is good--you've got to know a lot, and work a lot, to be a good guard."

The two Kanbalese women seemed very interested in Balsa and Chagum. "Why are you in Kanbal?" one of them asked.

"I'm from the Yonsa clan. I received a letter that my aunt was unwell. She lives alone, so I didn't want her to pass the winter by herself when she's sick."

"She lives alone?" the other woman said. "She must have other family--doesn't she?"

Balsa grinned. "My aunt is...a bit of a strange one. She likes her independence."

The two women exchanged nods, then caught sight of Balsa's spear. "Forgive me for saying so," one of the women said, "but you're a bit strange yourself, miss. You carry a short spear and are dressed like a warrior. Most of the spear wielders we tend to see are men."

Balsa kept smiling. "Sorry to seem strange, I guess. We'll only be staying for the night."

"Understood." The woman bowed a little. "It's best to keep traveling while the weather holds."

The bearded man portioned out the suchal stew into bowls for everyone. Then he gave everyone a slice of unleavened bread similar to Rotan bam. "The stew would go better with rice, but there's none to be had here. I sure hope it's not overdone..."

"Hush," the flautist said. "I'm sure it's absolutely fine."

The Yogoese guests laughed and joked with one another like old friends, but Chagum saw a hint of loneliness in their eyes. They were strangers in a land far from home--and they might never be able to go home again. When he and Balsa finally retired to their own room, he said, "I'll bet there are a lot of displaced people like that in Rota and Kanbal."

Balsa crouched down and started making a fire in the hearth. "Yeah. But what that man said isn't all wrong. They'll be safer from the war in New Yogo here--and people can live anywhere, not just their homeland."

"But everyone wants to go home," Chagum snapped, "if they can. Don't they? How would it feel to never see their families again, or eat rice again, or..." he trailed off.

Balsa sat on one of the room's beds. "It's not your fault, Chagum," she said. "Any of it. I understand why you feel responsible, since you're New Yogo's Crown Prince. But you didn't cause this situation, and you're already doing everything you can. The borders were caused on the Mikado's orders, to prevent people from Sangal and the countries to the south from coming in and spying for the Talsh empire."

Chagum looked down at his feet in the half-darkness.

"You blame yourself too much," Balsa said. "You see your dream, but that's high-level--it doesn't really affect us here, on the ground. You haven't hurt anyone. You're trying to save everyone. That burden is too much for any one person to bear. You don't get to decide the outcome of this situation."

Chagum looked up. He was crying. "But I want to decide it. I want to make sure everyone's all right." He sat on his bed, then stretched out on it and pulled his bedding over his head.

Balsa stayed awake for a long while, watching the fire make dancing shadows on the wall.

Chapter 6 - Evidence of Betrayal

The weather was so warm and clear for the next few days that Balsa found it hard to believe that it was winter in Kanbal. She and Chagum entered Kanbal's capital city only ten days after crossing the border. The people of the capital were all celebrating the arrival of the new year. Children carrying drums made of goatskin marched up and down the streets, beating out a fast rhythm with their instruments. Every store was open; merchants had traveled from each of the ten clan provinces to the capital to sell their wares for this event.

The capital was already the largest city in Kanbal by far; with the addition of all the extra people and animals who had come for the new year, it really did resemble a small city in Rota or New Yogo. Merchants set up their stalls inside of stone buildings or out on the streets; the entire setup had the festive air of a carnival. Chagum had spent a great deal of time in Tsuram harbor and Talsh cities on the southern continent, so Kanbal's capital appeared small to him--small and impoverished, like everywhere else he'd seen in Kanbal.

In part because the merchants and crowds seemed relatively sparse, Chagum's eyes were drawn to Kanbal's warriors. He saw thirty or forty young men--some young enough to still be boys--all carrying spears. *This is a country of warriors,* Chagum thought. Everyone seemed so tall and strong, even the women and children.

When Chagum looked up, he saw an eagle flying. Thin clouds streaked by overhead like trails of smoke. Though it was warm for winter, the wind was bitterly cold. Kanbal was a hard place full of hard people.

Chagum faced Balsa and said, "Balsa...you were raised here, right?"

"Yeah. Well, not *here* here. There's a district a little to the east where all of the palace guards and servants live with their families. That's where I lived until I was six." She looked around, then shook her head a

little. “When I was that age, I thought this city was enormous. There were more people than I’d ever seen before...well, I’d never really seen anywhere else. I never thought that Kanbal or my family was poor. It’s something of a surprise, coming back here after everything I’ve seen and done. Now the city seems small. Odd how time and experience change things.”

Balsa paused and looked at the children playing drums in the street. “It was fun to be a child here. Did you see the vendor selling red candy on that street we just passed?”

Chagum nodded. “That was candy? It looked like red fruit to me.”

“Yes, but it’s not. It’s marro, my favorite food in the world. My father always bought it for me when we came here. He spoiled me, probably.” She sighed. “It was just the two of us from early on, except for when aunt Yuka came to visit.” She was smiling, but there was pain behind her eyes.

Balsa and Chagum continued on their way in silence. They reached the outskirts of the city and found themselves surrounded by more Yogoese refugees like the ones they’d met at the inn. Some of them were huddled together, whispering and passing red pieces of paper back and forth.

“That looks like fortune telling,” Chagum said. Yogoese people always bought fortune slips at the start of the new year. They would face south, pray for the new year to be a good one, and read their fortunes. Even though all these Yogoese people were trapped in a foreign land, it seemed that some enterprising soul had made fortune slips and sold them.

It really is a new year. It had been hard for Chagum to believe it--the past year had passed in something of the blue of speed--but seeing the fortune slips made the passage of time real to him.

New Yogo would go to war this year.

“You can take off your face covering,” Balsa said. “It’s not that cold, and no one will look at us twice here--not even a Talsh spy, I think. It’s good for your wound to get a little air.”

Chagum pulled his hood back and lifted his face covering.

Balsa shifted a little toward him in her saddle. “Oh, I just remembered. Shihana said something about you seeing the spy who was working to bring Kanbal into an alliance with Talsh. Do you remember meeting anyone like that?”

Chagum thought for a long moment. “Uh...I don’t remember meeting anyone like that.” He nodded at his own words. “Yes, I definitely don’t. But I do remember one of the guards that Prince Ihan sent with me saying something like that.” He faced Balsa squarely. “I’ve been thinking about Prince Ihan’s letter, too, and the strategy behind it. It’s risky; I’m a little surprised at how fast he went along with the idea.” He sighed. “And I can’t stop thinking about that other Talsh spy I met. He was right there in Sangal with all the rulers of the northern continent. Whoever we’re looking for, he’s probably well-known and influential.” He frowned. “And if he’s well-known and influential in Kanbal, he’s probably a warrior.”

Balsa nodded. “I strongly suspect it’s one of the King’s Spears. They’re more free to travel than others, and them traveling doesn’t look too suspicious. Jiguro’s nephew is an honest sort, and he’s one of the Spears. I’m thinking of tracking him down and asking how things are in the palace before we go in.”

“Jiguro’s nephew?” Chagum’s face brightened. “I’d love to meet him.”

Balsa smiled. “All right, let’s do it. He lives in the same area I told you about, to the east of the royal palace, so we’ll be able to see the palace on the way there. Do you want to linger a little and take a look around?”

“Sure!”

The ground rose gradually into a hill as they left the city behind. The royal palace of Kanbal was built into the foot of a mountain; it towered majestically over the city below.

Chagum broke into a cold sweat and started shivering uncontrollably the moment the palace came into view.

“What’s wrong?” Balsa asked.

“I don’t know,” Chagum said. “I’m getting this strange feeling--not from the palace, but from the mountain behind it.”

Balsa’s eyebrows drew together. She knew that the Mountain King’s hall was at the very core of that mountain, deep below. The herders called that place a part of Noyook. Tanda and Chagum would call it Nayugu.

Balsa remembered when Chagum was still carrying the egg of the immature water spirit within himself. His expression now resembled his expressions then when was frightened of something in Nayugu.

“What kind of strange feeling?” Balsa asked. “Are you cold?”

“No... It’s like my guts have turned to water.” He looked down and blushed. “But it’s probably nothing. Just my imagination.”

Balsa tried to lay her doubts to rest; if Chagum said the feeling was nothing to be concerned about, she’d believe him. But he started shaking again when they were close to the palace. Goosebumps stood out all over his skin.

And then he smelled it, and knew he could not be mistaken: the water of Nayugu. He smelled it all around him, bright and clear and intense. This place was connected to Nayugu. He took a deep breath and tried to see what Naygu looked like here.

“Chagum?” Balsa asked. She shook his shoulder when he didn’t respond. He blinked in surprise. “Are you all right?” Balsa asked. “You’re white as a sheet.”

Chagum wiped cold sweat from his forehead. “I’m fine,” he said, “but can we move back a little? I don’t want to get any closer to the palace than this.”

“We can move away from it,” Balsa said. “What happened? Are you all right?”

Chagum sucked in a breath, then let it out slowly. “This place is close to Nayugu. I can smell Nayugu’s water. The closer I get to the palace, the more I feel like Nayugu is calling me. It’s hard to resist.”

Balsa pulled up on her reins to stop her horse. “Nayugu still calls to you, even though the egg is gone?”

Chagum nodded. “I thought I’d lose all awareness of Nayugu when the egg hatched, but I didn’t.” He thought for a moment. “I’ve been to places, special places where Nayugu and Sagu seem to touch. When I’m there, it’s like Nayugu is inviting me to come there to stay for good. I felt the same feeling in Sangal, and on a ship to Talsh.”

As Chagum spoke, several mounted warriors appeared at the gate of the royal palace. There were even more warriors mounted behind them, riding in file. They were riding into the city to help keep the peace during the new year’s festival. Balsa and Chagum glanced at them, then turned their backs on the royal palace and started riding away.

Balsa rode in silence for a while, but then she decided to tell Chagum at least a little of what she knew about this place. “The bottom of the mountain,” she said, “is definitely connected to Nayugu.”

Chagum looked at her in surprise.

“It’s a sacred place where a secret ceremony takes place. I can’t say much about it, even to you, but I can tell you that Nayugu and Sagu are connected in that place.”

Now Chagum was even more surprised: Balsa had seen Nayugu, or evidence of it, and she wasn’t going to tell him about it?

They entered the eastern part of the King’s city near the royal palace, where guards, retainers, and King’s Spears lived with their families. There were several stone buildings large enough to be considered houses and mansions all lined up in a long row down the street. One of the mansions had very high walls and a high, arched gate.

Balsa checked her horse in front of the mansion. “This is where I was born,” she said softly.

The walls were overgrown with vines and leaves. Chagum saw dead and withering trees on the other side of the gate; the mansion and its garden were clearly not being well-tended anymore.

“If it were spring,” Balsa said, “there would be so many flowers. Even now.” She looked up at the thin branches of the trees overhead. “I

always heard that my mother loved flowers. Even after she died, the house and the garden always smelled like flowers."

Balsa turned away from the gate. "Let's go," she said. "This is a stranger's house now."

Chagum nodded. They walked down the street at a slow pace. Red evening light bathed Balsa's shoulders in a soft glow. He remembered what she'd told him about her family and her past when they'd spent the winter in Hunter's Hole together.

Balsa had spent long years away from home fighting many battles. It was hard to describe what she felt now that she was home again. She turned corners and observed everything around her with a kind of quiet interior peace. The homes and mansions were lined up like the mounted guards they'd seen riding out of the gates of the palace.

Sometimes, she heard voices coming from the other side of a house's wall. The people she heard were probably making dinner; it was about that time. She caught cooking smells wafting through the air as her horse advanced.

She stopped in front of another house with a tall wrought-iron gate. Snow gleamed on its dark surface. The stone road here was white and even, like it had just been freshly paved. The gate's door was made of a thick and sturdy wood bound with more iron. Decorations that looked like red fruit hung from the door.

"This is where Kahm Musa lives," Balsa said. "I've been here before when I was injured and needed help. Kahm might not be here, but I'm pretty sure they'll let us wait to see him."

Balsa used the butt end of her spear to knock on the gate.

"Who is it?" a muffled voice asked from the other side.

"Forgive me for dropping by unexpectedly," Balsa said. "I'm Balsa of the Yonsa clan. I was hoping to meet with Kahm of the Musa clan. May I come in?"

She heard whispers on the other side of the gate, but she couldn't make out what anyone was saying. She waited a few minutes in awkward silence until she heard the gate opening from the inside.

There was a guard on the other side of the gate, tall and muscular. Two other men stood behind him. All three carried short spears like Balsa's--and all three looked astonishingly young. Balsa had been gone for so long that she didn't recognize any of them.

"Please forgive us for making you wait," the leader of the guards said. "Come in."

Balsa and Chagum dismounted and passed the reins of their horses into the hands of an approaching servant who appeared to be some kind of stablehand. She set down her weapon so that it could be collected by the guards: this was part of Kanbalese hospitality to ensure that guests and their hosts would not be harmed. Chagum set down his own weapon as well.

The guards led them across a courtyard garden paved with smooth stone. They fanned out in a formation in front and behind Balsa and Chagum as if they were trying to protect their guests. Trees loomed overhead in the half-darkness. Some servants passed them carrying torches to keep the garden lit at night. Smells of wet wood and moss smarted in Balsa's nostrils.

The house came into view at the other side of the courtyard. The door to the house was open; a tall man stood in the doorway. He was illuminated from behind, so Balsa and Chagum couldn't see his face, but Balsa thought that he looked a lot like Jiguro.

They climbed the steps up to the house and were finally close enough to see the man's face. "Balsa," Kahm said.

His voice was so familiar to her. She'd thought it when she'd met him the first time, but he was very like Jiguro as a young man. She stopped and stood still, waiting for him to say more.

Chagum stopped at Balsa's shoulder and looked at Kahm. Something in his hard, closed-off expression made Chagum feel a cold sense of dread. "Balsa," he whispered in warning. He grabbed her elbow.

There were men standing behind Kahm whose air was threatening. She searched Kahm's face for understanding and saw terrible pain in

his expression--the same kind of pain Jiguro had experienced when killing his friends.

One of the guards behind her raised his spear. She turned around and punched him in the throat. Another guard attacked before the first one hit the ground. She grabbed his arm and side-stepped behind him, then yanked his arm all the way up and back until she heard a crack: his arm was broken.

“Stop,” Kahm said. He reached Chagum in two steps and pulled his arms behind his back. Chagum had no doubt that Kahm was capable of breaking his arm as easily as Balsa had just broken the guard’s.

Balsa stepped away from the other guards and glared at Kahm. The only guard still standing stood behind Balsa and slapped his hands over her ears, splitting her eardrums. She felt a shock, then pain, before she passed out.

Part 2:

Disturbances in Nayugu

Chapter 1 - The Holy Sage's Death

Sunlight streaming in from high windows made the tall columns cut shadows across the floor of the Star Palace. Shuga sat at a large stone desk near a flickering fire. There were half a dozen star charts spread out on the desk in front of him. He felt eyes on him from somewhere and turned around.

Jin stood in the shadow of one of the room's columns.

"You really can move without making a sound," Shuga muttered.

"Are you planning to study forever?" Jin asked with a touch of sarcasm in his tone. "The meeting's going on without you, you know. You can't hide yourself in here forever."

"I'm not hiding. I just have a mountain of things to think about and figure out." He lowered his voice and asked, "Did you see any guards on the door?"

Jin nodded. "Two servants who don't usually work anywhere near this place. I'm not sure if Gakai or Lieutenant-General Karyou ordered them here, but I'm fairly sure it was one of them."

"Did you find out how lord Karyou is contacting the Talsh?" Shuga asked.

Jin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "There's a merchant attached to his household that often goes in and out. If I follow him and things go badly, the spy will be onto us--and I can't follow him using higher authority without more proof." He paused, then asked, "Has Karyou told you anything else?"

Shuga said nothing. He and Jin looked at one another for a long moment.

"Shuga," Jin said in a harsh tone, "what do you intend to do now?"

Shuga turned away from him, facing the windows and the light.

"Do you intend to accept lord Karyou's proposal?" Jin asked.

Shuga turned back toward Jin. “If I said I was, what would you do?” he asked.

Jin’s eyes glinted with dark malice. “If you plan to hand the country over to the Talsh, then I can’t let you live.”

“Why?” Shuga asked.

“Because of the harm that subservience to Talsh would do this country,” he said. “If we kneel at Talsh’s feet, we become their tools, to be used as weapons of warfare and commerce against our neighbors. They will take our food and our men for their armies and use them to invade the rest of the northern continent. Our country wouldn’t survive that. It makes you think about all those things the Mikado says about purity--anything that survived would be too polluted and corrupted to be recognizable.”

Shuga fixed a cold gaze on Jin. “I don’t think you understand the reasons why I would want to accept such a proposal. So let me explain.”

Jin flinched a little at the severity of his tone.

“I recognize the world you’re describing under Talsh rule,” he said. “It’s very likely accurate. But if we fight the Talsh head-on, the world will be even worse than that. Imagine how many people will die. The entire country will burn. The Talsh will take everything and leave us, and the people, nothing. The few who survive will be made slaves.”

The sharpness in his tone now reached his eyes. “Do you really think that’s better than subservience, and survival? Or do you have a better idea, one that doesn’t lead to so much destruction and death?”

Jin looked down. “So you intend to beg,” he said. Before Shuga could blink, there was a knife at his throat.

“I want the people to live.” He held Jin’s gaze steadily.

Jin looked away. “So you’ll ally yourself with Karyou and kill the Mikado, then?”

Hunters lived to serve and protect the Mikado. Jin’s father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all sworn oaths to protect him from any danger. Jin had defied the Mikado’s orders in sparing Crown

Prince Chagum's life, so his loyalty was, perhaps, not as strong as that of his ancestors. That being said, he would never kill the Mikado, or stand aside to let others do it. He felt sick just thinking about it.

Jin pressed down a little on the knife at Shuga's throat. A drop of blood shone on the blade.

Shuga remained calm. "If killing me would save the Mikado, do it. Kill me, kill Karyou, and wait for the Talsh army to come and burn the city and the palace to the ground. Protect your Mikado for as long as you can, until they come to murder him, too. But realize that by doing that, you're helping to usher in that future."

Jin was sweating, but his expression was as calm and dispassionate as the surface of a lake in winter.

"If I agree to lord Karyou's proposal," he said, "I can start talking to the Talsh, maybe even Prince Raul. The proposal as it currently stands is favorable to us. If the Mikado dies, then the Crown Prince will be the next Mikado. Our people won't be killed; cities and villages won't be burned. I don't think that accepting such a proposal is inherently wrong. It's the Mikado's duty to guide the nation, and the Star Readers' duty to guide the Mikado. I see no inherent contradiction in accepting this proposal and staying true to my core mandate."

The hand that held the knife to Shuga's throat started shaking. Blood dripped onto Shuga's collar. Jin clenched the fist that held the knife, then removed the knife from Shuga's neck.

"The Mikado's son must live to rule," he said.

Shuga stared at Jin for a long moment, then nodded.

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Four days later, the Holy Sage, Hibi Tonan, breathed his last.

He died without formalizing who his successor should be. When he'd first fallen ill, he had selected Shuga, Gakai and Ozuru as potential candidates to succeed him. He was going to choose one of the

candidates definitively after a period of observation, but his illness had worsened rapidly, giving him neither the time nor the strength to make a decision.

He collapsed quite suddenly to the floor on the morning of his death, and he never rose again. He held on to life for some hours, struggling to speak; the keen perception and intelligence in his eyes were a shadow of what they'd once been. He eventually fell into a deep sleep from which he was never to awaken.

The Holy Sage had been the Mikado's closest confidant and friend for many, many years--and now, he was gone, right when the Mikado needed his wisdom and experience the most.

Shuga had been preparing for this day for a long time, but the Holy Sage's death still came as something of a shock. He considered it likely that the Mikado would appoint Gakai as the next Holy Sage after his hundred days of mourning Hibi Tonan were concluded. He had guessed that Gakai was the favorite from the very beginning.

The instant he heard about Hibi Tonan's death, Shuga felt all of his vulnerabilities plainly, as if there were holes all over his body. The first emotion that overcame him was despair. The Holy Sage had protected him and his status simply by living for so long that Shuga had taken him for granted.

There was no one left to teach him now if he was ever lost or confused or needed help with his interpretations. He had desperately wanted to consult with him on the impending war--but now, he never could.

Shuga remained alone in his room for a long time after hearing the news.

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The Mikado spent the day and night in official mourning, but his facade of placid calm did not crack. He went to the sacred spring, purest and holiest of all places in the imperial palace, to cleanse himself.

When he was clean, he secluded himself in his most private and sacred hall, shut the door, and thought about the Holy Sage as he'd been in life. Hibi Tonan had been his teacher in childhood. His father had died early, so the Mikado had learned how to be a Mikado and a man from the Holy Sage; he'd certainly learned more from him than his own father.

Because of his father's early death, the Mikado had ascended the throne while he was still young. Many tried to manipulate him or seize part of his power, but the Holy Sage always supported and protected him. He taught him how to understand complex politics and economics so that he could rule New Yogo well.

Hibi Tonan had always been by his side for as long as he could remember, but now, he would never open his eyes again.

The Mikado stood in his hall and stared into the darkness, still as a statue, and he grieved.

Chapter 2 - A Soldier's Life

Tanda bent double with his back aching as he climbed. When he wiped his forehead, mud and sweat caked his sleeve. The sight before his eyes was cruel and inescapable.

Farmers and villagers took up their hoes to destroy their rice fields and build deep, muddy trenches in their place. The trenches nearest to the ocean were unstable without scaffolding, so people ran back and forth carrying bamboo poles to shore them up.

The work of digging trenches had gone on for days without a break. *I wonder if the farmers will be able to regain this land and use it to grow rice after the war,* Tanda thought. The year's harvest from this field had been destroyed: trampled down by workers over the past few days.

Tanda felt a sudden pang of misery. It was likely that he'd never see rice growing in a peaceful field ever again. He wiped his forehead again and blinked to clear sweat out of his eyes, then started shoring up the trenches again. Someone screamed nearby. Tanda glanced at the man next to him; he'd also heard the scream. It was coming from the direction of the river.

There was probably a village nearby. More screams and cries followed the first; Tanda was able to make out some words. It seemed that riders from the cavalry unit had gone to the village to burn their boats. The screams belonged to people who were begging the soldiers not to burn the source of their livelihoods.

The riders paid no heed to the villagers' screams. They had been ordered to burn the boats so that the enemy wouldn't be able to steal and make use of them.

It seems like such a waste, Tanda thought. What could the enemy even accomplish with a couple of stolen fishing boats?

"There must be a way for us to make use of them. Destroying them doesn't make any sense."

The commander of Tanda's unit let out a call on horseback. The commander wasn't even twenty years old yet, but the men in Tanda's unit had no other authority to rely on.

"What are you muttering there?" the commander asked.

"Nothing, sir," Tanda said quietly. "I was just wondering if we might make use of the boats instead of burning them."

The commander's face brightened. He was used to scolding Tanda and the other men to keep them from slacking off, but this duty was a boring one at the best of times. He jumped on the opportunity to have an actual conversation.

"We are making use of the boats," the commander said. "If we sink enough of them, the enemy won't be able to sail any of their vessels along the river. Our wreckage will block their way. It's a well-known military strategy described in the book *One Hundred War Strategies*."

"We're making it easier for the enemy to move over land by getting rid of the rice fields and building trenches," Tanda said. "Why would they try to travel via the river when it's just as easy to move over land with their horses?"

"That's a shallow way of thinking," the commander said. "It's obvious that you haven't been a soldier long. We're doing this to the rice fields so that it's easier to mobilize and protect our own forces. But Sangal could try to send up their smaller boats as scouts, or to sneak forces past our patrols. That's why it's a good idea to sink so many boats in the river. It will impede the enemy's progress."

Tanda shook his head. "All rivers flow downstream to the ocean from here. Any enemy spies would have to row against the current. That's a slow and difficult way to travel. I doubt our enemies would choose to travel that way if there was any other option. Trying to row against a strong current would be loud, too--we'd hear them.

The commander smirked at him. "Perhaps you're right, but you're forgetting one very important thing."

"What's that, sir?" Tanda asked. He regretted asking almost as soon as he opened his mouth. He'd already said too much; he should probably let this subject be.

"The current in the rivers depends on the tide," the commander said. "The people in the the village know all about it. At certain times of day, the current in the rivers flows differently--sometimes in the completely opposite direction that it does normally. This is recorded in *One Hundred War Strategies,* too."

Tanda had never seen the young commander so much in his element before. He seemed to like talking to Tanda about strategy and warfare--and he also seemed to have gotten all of his information from books.

“Have you told the other commanders and generals about that?” Tanda asked. “That might be the useful information for shipping our own men and supplies up and down the river.”

The commander’s bright-faced enthusiasm soured. “They don’t listen to me,” he said. “I have little experience and my social status isn’t usually high enough to get me a hearing.”

“Why not seek out the lieutenant?” Tanda asked. “He seems like a man who would listen.”

The commander nodded, but then shook his head in denial. “You’re right. He would listen, but I have orders not to take anything superfluous to our mission here to him. So I can’t really tell this to him, either.” The young commander sighed.

The commander realized that he’d been talking to Tanda for quite a while. He stood up straight and barked, “Back to work! No rest until you’ve completed shoring up this area.”

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Tanda and the other men digging were finally given a break at sunset, when it was so dark that they could no longer see their hands as they worked. Tanda’s unit went down to the banks of the Blue Bow river to wash off sweat and grime from the day’s hard labor. It was only three days before the new year, so the river water was bitterly cold, but the men endured it.

For Tanda, bathing was usually the most pleasant activity of the day. He worked all day with the others, was fed meager rations and slept short hours, but he always bathed at the end of each day.

After his bath, he lined up with the others in his unit in the tall grass and waited for his helping of rice and vegetable stew. Everyone in the

army ate mostly the same thing from day to day. By good luck, the southern part of the country had an excellent harvest this year, and the year before as well, so there'd been no trouble keeping the army fed yet. Tanda did wonder if there was enough to feed the army as well as all the common people and farmers in the villages. No one ever told him how things were faring back home.

Kocha sat next to Tanda. He was shivering. The people from his own village continued to bully him and beat him up, so he stuck close to Tanda whenever he could. The weather was usually unseasonably warm during the day, but the nights were cold; Kocha's shivering grew worse as Tanda ate.

"Kocha, have you eaten?" Tanda asked.

"Yeah, I did before," Kocha said. He leaned forward and extended his hands over the cooking fire in front of him. He still didn't stop shivering.

Tanda frowned. Kocha was young, and he looked frail. How much longer would he be expected to shoulder the same burdens and perform the same physical work as strong and healthy adults? The rations they received weren't enough for a growing boy.

"Want half of mine?" Tanda asked.

Kocha's eyes lit up. "Are you sure?"

Tanda nodded, then passed his bowl to Kocha. He ate greedily, savoring the stew, which was still hot.

Tanda's stomach growled, but he ignored it. He could be hungry for a day. This part of the army was heading into the mountains soon, so he'd be able to catch birds and game to eat there. He could also replenish his supply of medicinal herbs. Many men were already sick with exhaustion from their long labor; some had sustained injuries. There wasn't much he could do for them with his current supplies, but he hoped to change that soon.

Kocha returned Tanda's bowl to him after he finished eating. There was still a bit left in the bowl. Tanda smiled and ate it.

"Are you still having bad dreams?" Tanda asked.

Kocha shook his head. “No. I fall asleep as soon as work is done at the end of the day. I haven’t had any dreams at all.”

Kocha was like Asra: he could see what was going on in Nayugu at will. He’d tried to warn the men of the army about a terrible landslide; he’d seen the signs of it in Nayugu before it happened. But his warning hadn’t been heeded. Many men had had died in the landslide.

Tanda had met Kocha on the night of the landslide. Some of the men from his village had beaten him for telling them to run away. Kocha had told Tanda about his nightmares then. Tanda had been worried about him ever since. He could do nothing for Asra here, but he felt the need to protect and support Kocha as much as he could. He believed that Kocha would be able to warn the army of other dangers. The Yakoo called people like Kocha an o chal--a canary in a coal mine, or an early warning system before a disaster.

“Kocha,” Tanda said, “how often do you usually have dreams?”

“When I was still in my village, I had them every night,” Kocha said. “When we were climbing the mountains outside the capital, I didn’t have any dreams at all. I started having the dreams again when we got close to the river. When I passed by the capital itself, I got goosebumps all over and couldn’t stop shivering.”

“Where is your home village?” Tanda asked.

“Okka,” Kocha said.

“Okka...that’s near the Misty Blue Mountains, right? I think it’s close to Kanbal.”

Kocha nodded.

Tanda frowned. Okka was primarily a Yakoo village, and most Yakoo villages in New Yogo were poor. He could imagine the desperation that Kocha’s father must have felt when he’d given his son to the army.

He didn’t understand the pattern behind Kocha’s dreams. Asra had been incredibly frightened when she’d passed by the capital, though. That was why she and Chikisa had visited him in his hut.

Do the dreams have something to do with the Blue Bow river?

But Kocha wasn't having dreams now, and they were camped right next to the river.

Tanda remembered what he'd seen while investigating strange disturbances in Nayugu for his master, Torogai. He'd seen water everywhere, but it all seemed to fall off a cliff when it reached the Misty Blue Mountains. The farther north he'd gone, the less water in Nayugu he'd seen.

Tanda broke out into a cold sweat. *If Kocha, Asra and I are correct in what we're seeing...there could be a flood. A terrible flood that engulfs the entire country.*

He had to get a message to Torogai. They had to warn as many people as they could. He decided to project his soul to his master at the earliest opportunity.

Projecting his soul over such a far distance would be incredibly difficult: there were many souls between his and Torogai's. He would have to fly past them all and search for Torogai's. It might take a long time to find her.

Still, he had to try.

He was exhausted. The strength of his soul projection depended partially on the strength of his body, which had been weakened by weeks of hard marching, difficult labor, and short rations.

Kocha fell asleep with his head on Tanda's shoulder.

Can I project my soul now? Or will it kill me?

He wasn't sure.

Tanda listened to Koucha breathe and closed his eyes.

Chapter 3 - A Soul in Flight

The next night, Tanda awoke from unquiet sleep. Men snored all around him. He extricated himself silently from his warm bedding and stood up.

It was freezing. His shilya bedding was thick enough to keep him warm even in the middle of winter, but he'd left his bed so fast that he felt the cold like a stinging slap. He picked up one of his blankets and settled it over his shoulders. He stepped around his neighbors carefully so that they wouldn't wake up. Eventually, he reached the edge of the camp near a forest.

If he was really going to project his soul, he needed a susuki leaf as a charm. Susuki leaves had the power to guide souls to a destination; if he had one, he'd be able to find his way back easily after he found Torogai. The leaf would make a glowing trail between his soul and his body. He also needed a certain kind of bamboo to surround himself with so that his body wouldn't be disturbed by evil spirits while his soul was gone.

He found a susuki leaf in the forest, then tore it in half and folded it into a charm, chanting all the while. He still needed bamboo; evil spirits shunned it. If he left his body alone for too long, one of those evil spirits might come and try to possess it.

He searched the forest for hours, but he didn't find any bamboo of the right type for his purposes. He gave up the search for the moment, then went down to the river to bathe. By good luck, there was a long, thin stalk of just the right kind of bamboo growing near the river's edge. He cut it, wrapped it in bamboo leaves, and went to the outskirts of the village. He now had everything he needed to project his soul over a far distance.

Tanda asked some of the men from his village to keep watch over a weapons shed that didn't get much use. He concealed himself inside and got to work. The men keeping watch were curious about what he

was up to, but he was a magic weaver. Even when he tried to explain it to them, they didn't entirely understand.

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Tanda walked through the woods and looked up at a sky bright with silver stars. It was almost the end of the year, so the moons were scarcely visible. Most people celebrated at the end of the year and the start of a new one, but there had been no celebrations this year. The war would begin before spring. Soldiers from Talsh and Sangal would come and crush villages beneath their heels like so much dust.

It all seemed so unreal to Tanda. If anyone had told him a year ago that New Yogo would soon be at war, he would never have believed them. The commander of New Yogo's forces had given many stirring speeches about the Talsh coming to kill their families and burn their homes to motivate the raw Yogoese recruits, but Tanda didn't feel any braver or any more like a soldier than he had when he'd first taken Kaiza's place in the army.

It was also hard for Tanda and the other men to view Sangal as an enemy; they'd been allies with New Yogo for as long as anyone could remember. It was easy for Tanda to envision the Talsh as some kind of ravening beast intent on bloodshed, but he couldn't think the same way about New Yogo's long-time trading partner and ally.

Tanda usually didn't pay much attention when the commander gave his big speeches against their enemies. He was a practical man, and his months of travel and hard work had made him cynical. The Yogoese were originally from the same continent as the Talsh; they had conquered the Yakoo's territory and treated them as second-class citizens. It was hard to believe that the Talsh would be much worse after a takeover. The initial battles would be, but the aftermath could be better for the Yakoo, for all Tanda knew. The commander seemed to lack awareness that most of the men in his army were Yakoo and not Yogoese.

It was true that the people of New Yogo had a long history of peace; there had been no wars in living memory, so New Yogo had no battle-hardened veterans to send to the battlefield as Talsh did. Tanda sometimes wondered if the Yogoese's peaceable attitude was the reason why the Yakoo had never fought them after they'd landed on the Nayoro peninsula.

If the Yogoese had come bearing weapons, Tanda was certain that the Yakoo would have run away. Many Yakoo had run to the mountains when the Yogoese had first appeared on the continent, but most hadn't remained there. The Yogoese hadn't come to fight. They made farms, planted rice, and built villages and cities, and they didn't exclude the Yakoo. After the Yakoo started living among the Yogoese, they taught them the best places to find clean water and the best times to plant. Over time, the Yakoo and Yogoese peoples had mixed together, living in peace if not always in equality.

Aside from high nobles and warriors, most people in New Yogo were of mixed race, with darker hair and skin than the Yogoese settlers. Given enough time, even nobles and warriors might be integrated into that same mixed race that almost everyone shared. Tanda thought that would be a good thing; discrimination based on race wouldn't be possible if everyone was more or less the same one. But he also thought that it shouldn't matter what race someone was--Yogoese, Yakoo, Sangalese, Talsh. People were people, no matter where they came from. If the Talsh did manage to conquer New Yogo, he expected the end result to be much the same as what had happened with the Yogoese settlers. Within a hundred years or so, the Talsh who settled there would have mixed with the natives.

The Mikado might care if a foreign king or emperor took over his land and deposed him, but that didn't matter at all to Tanda. All he wanted was to live out his life in peace. It didn't really matter to him who was in charge. The people who really mattered were the farmers who grew the rice and the traders who moved goods around the continent. Together, they kept everyone supplied and fed.

Tanda had no desire to kill for the Mikado's sake. While shoring up the trenches, that thought had been the only one on his mind. Even if he was the kind of man who could kill, he wouldn't do it for the sake of the Mikado, a man he'd never met and didn't like. That being the case, he should probably desert and go home--but if he did that, all the soldiers in the army from his village would be killed.

Tanda sighed heavily while looking up at the clear, cold sky. It seemed likely to him that Asra and Kocha's premonitions of disaster concerned the Talsh somehow. The mass migration of water dwellers to the north coincided with the movement of the Talsh invasion force. Could that be a coincidence? Tanda didn't know. But he was a magic weaver, and that meant that he had to figure out what was going on in Nayugu and interpret it.

If you really want to be a successful magic weaver, you have to keep your eyes and ears open, Tanda.

Torogai had told that to him often. Being a magic weaver meant seeing things that other people couldn't see and hearing things that other people couldn't hear. The people in his village had laughed at him when he was younger and pointed out things that they couldn't see, but he couldn't let other people discourage him.

He wanted to see Torogai. He hadn't seen her dark, craggy face in what felt like ages.

Tanda reached the nearest village and stopped in front of a tall tree. He reached out and touched it; he could tell that it was an ukal tree by its fragrance. Ukal trees were often used to make perfumes.

"Mr. Tree, allow me to stay here tonight," he said with a slight smile. "I need your protection for what I need to do next."

Tanda surrounded the tree with bamboo leaves from his special bamboo to make a barrier, then placed his back to the tree. It felt warm on the ground with the tree blocking the wind. Tanda took the charm he'd made from a susuki leaf in one hand, then closed his eyes.

Tanda chanted the words that would allow his spirit to leave his body. He felt his spirit detach slowly, rising above his head. He felt much

warmer now than he had while walking to the village. His soul thread rose in a straight line from his forehead, emitting faint light as it stretched out. Tanda manipulated the shape of his soul thread so that the thin and delicate thread transformed into the wings and body of a bird, then took flight into the night sky.

The soul of every creature he could see emitted light. Gold and blue illumination mixed below him, revealing the spirits of trees and animals and insects. Viewing all of it from above was an astonishing sight. He'd expected to see more damage from the war preparations: trees cut down, animals displaced, rivers polluted with waste, but everything he saw teemed with life and health. The war hadn't come yet. He didn't want to imagine seeing this view after a battle.

As Tanda approached Nayoro peninsula, the colors he saw became richer and deeper; the smells were earthy and pleasant. He felt like he was coming home. Warmth cocooned his soul thread as he flew.

Tanda smelled the sharp, clean smell of Nayugu's water and blinked.

This must be a place where Nayugu and Sagu overlap...

It was often difficult for Tanda to see Nayugu, even in spirit form; he usually saw it all dimly, as if through a misty haze. Now he saw it with slightly more definition, like a reflection or shadow. There were mountains below him--the mountains of Nayugu--but everything but their peaks were underwater. The mountains looked like islands dotting a vast ocean.

Mixed in with the water, Tanda saw more glowing figures, all headed in the same direction: north. He squinted and saw that the glowing figures were all different colors: blue and white, red and yellow, purple and green. It was a riot of color; he'd never seen so many spirits of different types gathered in one place like this before.

The light that Tanda saw pulsed, revealing Sagu again. It pulsed again, revealing Nayugu. Tanda felt his heart beat faster in his ears, as if he were face to face with the woman he loved.

It's spring, Tanda thought. It was spring in Nayugu. Nayugu wasn't limited to the Nayoro peninsula: Rota and Kanbal would also feel the effects of Nayugu's spring. Everything thrummed to the rhythm of Nayugu's pulse. Tanda saw the full cycle of life from the sky: plants and animals dying, then growing and laying eggs and being born. He felt drunk from the complexity of the perspective and closed his eyes.

When Tanda opened his eyes, he was flying over mountains again. He'd lost track of how far he'd flown, but he knew that he needed to follow the line of the river through the Misty Blue Mountains to find Torogai's hut.

The river will take me to Kosenkyo. From there, I just need to fly east for a little while.

Tanda suddenly felt cold. His physical body had been weakened by harsh treatment in recent days. Sending his spirit flying over such a

long distance was rapidly draining his remaining strength.

His wings felt as heavy as lead as he pushed himself to keep flying. He felt pain along the line of his spine whenever he flapped his wings. He started to descend far before reaching his goal.

He just had to make it a little longer. The capital was in front of him. He was almost there.

Master Torogai... Please be home when I get there. I won't be able to search for you if you're not there.

Slowly, so slowly, Tanda flew onward until the mountains stretched out below him. Familiar landmarks and smells gave Tanda something of a second wind; he kept encouraging himself to go just a little farther.

When the hut finally came into view, Tanda closed his eyes and let despair overwhelm him. There were no lights on inside. He couldn't keep flying anymore. He half-fell, half-flew onto the roof of the hut, then slipped inside.

A bright light flashed before Tanda's eyes. He felt his body being suspended in the light.

"Ah!"

There were four susuki leaves in the hut: one in each corner of the hut. They each emitted a streak of light, interconnecting with each other in a criss-cross pattern. In the time it took for Tanda to blink, he was caught in a net of light formed by the susuki leaves.

The net lifted him up--all the way up, out of the hut and into the sky again. His exhaustion gradually eased; the net was comfortable and sustaining. He passed over a low mountain slope into a valley. This was Sahnan, where the water spirit's egg had hatched.

Tanda's spirit dropped gently into Torogai's hands. Since Tanda was in spirit form, he could see the golden brightness of Torogai's own spirit.

"There you are, my clumsy apprentice. You pushed yourself so hard that you can't move, huh? Stretch yourself out now so you don't get stiff."

Tanda trembled all over, but he did as Torogai said and tried to stretch. His spirit returned to its human shape and size.

“You really are hopeless,” Torogai said. “How many times have I told you not to fly so far? You’re not strong enough to make it back.”

Tanda laughed. “If that’s the case, Master, why not come and visit me? I haven’t seen you once since I went off to war.”

Torogai’s eyebrows shot up. “Idiot! Do you think that I would fly so far, at my advanced age, without a very good reason? Projecting the soul is a young magic weaver’s trick. The older you get, the stronger the pull of the other world becomes.”

Torogai stretched out her hands and cupped Tanda’s cheeks as if he were a little child. “But I’m glad to see you. And I’m glad you made it. Well done.”

Tanda swallowed a lump in his throat and blinked back tears.

“Master, please listen. I flew all the way here because I had to tell you something no matter what.”

Tanda told Torogai everything he’d heard from Asra and Kocha, as well as his own observations of Nayugu’s water level. He felt that something terrible was about to happen, but he didn’t know exactly what, or when.

Torogai nodded at him when he finished speaking. “You’re right. Something terrible is on the horizon. I’ve been thinking much the same thing for a while. I’ve been meeting with other magic weavers. Though we’re still not sure what we can do, we’re committed to doing everything we can.”

Tanda’s heart was lightened by Torogai’s words. He had told Torogai his message and discovered that she was working to prevent the disaster that he feared. He should probably get back to the army camp as soon as possible.

Torogai helped Tanda’s spirit regain its bird shape. She clutched Tanda to her chest briefly, then released him into the sky.

“Don’t you dare die on your way back,” she scolded. “You must live, and return again someday.” She said a few magic words to lend Tanda strength for the journey back to his body, then started walking back to her hut.

Tanda flew away from her, though he kept looking back until she was completely out of sight. The day would come when he would see her with his own two eyes again.

As Tanda picked up speed, he noticed that it was almost dawn. He shivered and raised his eyes to the sky. When he got back to his body at the base of the tree, he was so cold that he hunched forward, rubbing his arms for a few minutes to get the feeling back into them. He’d made it back to the camp. The hug he gave himself wasn’t nearly as warm as the one he’d received from Torogai.

Chapter 4 - Marriage of the Spirits

Kassa felt the solution of togal and water press into his closed eyelids.

“There we go. You can open your eyes now,” Yoyo the herder said.

Kassa opened his eyes. Usually, the caves were too dark for Kassa to see anything, but now there was a faint light over everything, like the cave was illuminated by starlight.

“Can you sense anything? Or see anything?” Yoyo asked. His tone was strangely apprehensive.

Kassa cleared out his ears with his fingers, then opened his eyes wide. Yoyo had told him that he’d sensed something strange in the caves this winter. Kassa hadn’t noticed anything, but he wanted to at least try to see and feel what Yoyo did.

But Kassa didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. He shrugged a little sadly. “I’m sorry, Yoyo,” he said. “I don’t see anything.”

Yoyo sighed. His father, Dodo, stood beside him and shook his head slightly.

I should have expected this. I guess Kanbalese people really can’t see it.

Yoyo looked up at Kassa, who was much taller than him now. Yoyo felt the difference in their heights like he felt the separation between their peoples. The herder people were born in the very heart of the mountains and dwelt in them; the people of Kanbal’s clans spent most of their lives on the surface of the earth or the mountains in the sun.

I wish that Kassa could understand...

Events that happened in Noyook wouldn’t only affect the herder people. Kassa had to understand exactly what was going on so that he could warn his clan. His uncle Kaguro was the head of the Musa clan. If Kassa could convince him to act, many lives might be saved.

If things kept going as they were, with the people of Kanbal remaining ignorant of the change of the season in Noyook, there would be an epic and irrecoverable disaster.

“How about if we try showing him the lake?” Dodo asked.

Yoyo nodded cautiously. “Good idea. Maybe he’ll be able to see that.”

Dodo took Kassa’s hand and led him deeper into the cave. Yoyo walked out ahead of them. Kassa had a deep and personal fear of the caves, which were guarded by hyoulu, guardians of the darkness. Kassa had seen the hyoulu as a boy and had never forgotten his terror of them. Kassa followed close on Yoyo’s heels, staying close to his friend. His shoulders shook slightly.

There were many thin and winding branches in the caves; it was easy to get lost without a guide. After a few minutes of twisting and turning, the path spread out into a wide open space with a smooth underground lake. It was so large that it was hard to make out anything on the other side of it. Kassa took a few cautious steps closer to the lake, then stood still.

“Take a good look,” Yoyo said. “Can you see any ripples on the water?”

Kassa concentrated hard. If he looked very closely at a single spot, he could see ripples: lots of them, emerging from a single source beneath the water’s surface. He had seen bubbles rise to the surface and cause ripples in swamp water before, but he saw no bubbles in the lake, only ripples.

But what was causing them? He couldn’t tell. It was like there was something in the water that he couldn’t see.

But Yoyo and his father could see it. The ripples weren’t caused by any creature of Sagu, but by spirits of Noyook. They danced along the surface of the water in a strange and ancient ceremony that the herder people called the marriage of the spirits.

There were spirits that looked like fish, lizards, snakes, and other animals, all moving around one another in the dance. The spirits danced in the warm water of Noyook. They had flowed down Noyook's

river from the ocean into the heart of the Yusa Mountains more than a month ago now, dancing around one another in a strange ceremony.

The spirits didn't simply dance on the water, but on the walls of the cave as well.

They'd been dancing for such a long time. Time in Noyook and time here must work differently, Yoyo thought. Toto the Elder had told him that the dance would likely continue for several more months. Since that first night when Yoyo had seen the spirits coming up the river of Noyook into the mountains, the Titi Lan had completely disappeared. No one had seen them after that night.

The Herders knew the Titi Lan's ways and habits better than anyone, but all they really knew was that they hunted late at night on their weasel mounts. The Herders didn't know where they could have gone. Toto the Elder said that the Titi Lan were ruled over by an ancient queen, and that once she reached the end of her life, she took a mate and gave birth to the next queen. All of the Titi Lan vanished into the mountains to celebrate this ritual. The marriage ceremony of the Titi Lan queen hadn't been witnessed by anyone in living memory.

I'm sure the Titi Lan are starting their marriage ceremony now. The time of the spirits mating in Noyook and the Titi Lan's marriage ceremony seem to be closely connected.

Toto the Elder claimed that the Herders had once been closer to being like the Titi Lan than they were now. "A long time ago, the Herders came out of the depths of the mountains and remained on the surface of the earth. Over time, we lost our mountain-senses and became more like the Kanbalese people. It is spring in Noyook now. Don't forget what that means."

Toto had told Yoyo and the other Herders many legends concerning spring in Noyook. They would see now how many of them were true.

"What's causing these ripples?" Kassa asked.

Before Yoyo could answer, the ground beneath his feet began to shake. He felt like there was an enormous creature under the earth, burrowing just under his legs.

“Watch out! The rock will collapse in on itself!” Yoyo’s father Dodo called out.

Yoyo and Kassa jumped back as the rock fell out from under their feet. More rock fell from the ceiling, streaking dust and dirt through the air.

“Jump in the water!” Dodo yelled. He pushed Kassa and Yoyo forward so that they fell into the lake. One of the falling rocks hit Kassa in the skull. He went limp and swallowed too much water.

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A few moments before the cave-in, a group of women worked busily in a weaver’s hut on the mountain. It was an unusually warm day, for winter. Gina would have loved to play outside on such a day, but she was getting older, so she usually wove with her mother every day. Her brother Kassa had gone out with the Herders that morning. He’d seemed very secretive. Gina wondered if he’d tell her what he’d seen when he came home.

She asked her mother about a particular line of weaving that looked crooked. Her mother righted the line, then struck up a conversation with Yoyo’s mother, who was sitting across from her.

All of a sudden, all of the Herder women stopped speaking. They set their weaving aside and looked at one another. “Did you hear that?” Yoyo’s mother asked.

The Herder women nodded. Their faces went pale from fear. The Kanbalese women appeared puzzled and looked at the Herder women with expressions of concern. Yoyo’s mother stood up from her chair and went outside.

A few moments later, she returned and threw the door wide open. “Everyone! Get outside! Hurry!” she yelled.

The Herder women mobilized as quickly as if they were preparing to chase a runaway goat. The Kanbalese women followed them, still

confused, clasping their youngest children in their arms as they ran.

The Herder women opened up all of the goat pens and chased the animals out. “Look there!” one of the Herder women said.

Gina looked where she pointed and froze in shock. A wave of snow coursed down the mountain in the largest avalanche she’d ever seen. It was headed right for the goat pens and the weaving hut.

“Avalanche!” several women shouted together. They gathered their children more tightly to their chests and started running. The goats ran in front of them, bleating in fear.

The avalanche advanced behind them like a crashing ocean wave. Stone homes were crushed as it consumed them. The goat pens were completely smashed; the weaving hut was buried completely. The Herder women picked a path to avoid the worst of the avalanche; the Kanbalese women followed them closely, still panicking. Not all of the women escaped from the enormous wave of snow.

When the avalanche finally ended, the women looked at one another with relieved glances. They backtracked a little in the hopes of finding their friends in the snow and retrieving their weaving, though there didn't seem to be much hope in either case. Without the advance warning of the Herder women, they would all be dead.

Chapter 5 - Strange Omens

It was sunset at the Musa clan's castle. Everyone was tense and anxious when they received news of the sudden avalanche in their domain. The loss of the weavers' hut and goat pens was a significant blow to the local economy, but it seemed that no one had been seriously

hurt. Most of the goats had already been rounded up and penned in the other villages. Everyone expressed their gratitude to the Herder women who had warned everyone about the avalanche.

“Their ears are so much better than ours,” the Kanbalese women said. “They can hear things that we can’t.”

The clan head, Kaguro, listened to the news, then stalked down the hallway as he considered what kind of aid should be sent to the village. He heard another commotion coming from the great hall and turned around. Several riders were behind him, riding up the wide hall; one had a young boy in the saddle in front of him. The boy was very pale, but Kaguro would know his face anywhere.

“Kassa! Are you all right?”

The riders entered a hall lit by a roaring fire, then set Kassa down next to it. A physician knelt down next to the boy and started checking his condition.

Yoyo, Kassa’s friend among the Herders, was also with him. “A stone fell on his head,” Yoyo said to the doctor. “He swallowed water when he was unconscious. We got him out of the water and warmed him up; he’s breathing, so I don’t think his life is in danger. I don’t know if anything’s broken...”

Kaguro had just sat down next to Kassa when he felt someone tug at his sleeve. An old Herder man stood behind him. He tugged Kaguro’s sleeve again. Kaguro understood that he wanted to discuss something in private. He stood up, then guided the Herder into the next room. He made sure that there was no one else inside, then locked the door.

Kaguro invited the old Herder man to sit in a chair in front of the room’s dying fire. Ashes streaked the floor.

“What brings you to our castle, Toto the Elder?” he asked politely. The Herder man was old and filthy and clothed in goatskin leather, but Kaguro recognized him easily. His clan had always given the Herders the respect they deserved as people who knew how to live in the mountains. The Herders also orchestrated the ceremony that allowed the King of Kanbal to harvest luisha, a precious stone that could be

traded for grain to ensure the people's survival over winter. The Herders and the King of Kanbal both had to cooperate to gain luisha, which would only be granted if the King of Kanbal revealed his heart and accepted that of the Mountain King, a powerful spirit in Noyook.

The King of Kanbal was served by the nine greatest warriors in the land, chosen from each of Kanbal's clans. These warriors were known as the King's Spears. Without the respect of these warriors, no king could rule in Kanbal. In the ceremony of the giving of luisha, these nine warriors had to battle the Mountain King's warriors, called hyoulu, guardians of the darkness. This fight was not a fight to the death, but a dance that revealed the heart. If the Mountain King was satisfied with the honesty of the King and the King's Spears in this dance, luisha would be granted.

The last time luisha had been granted had been four years ago, when the foster daughter of Kaguro's younger brother Jiguro had successfully completed the spear dance. Until that time, only people who were King's Spears had ever gained luisha.

"Clan leader of Musa," Toto said, bowing his head a little. "First, I feel that I must apologize. Kassa followed us into the caves, which is how he was injured. We didn't want it to happen, but I'll take responsibility all the same."

Kaguro frowned, causing a scar on his right cheek to pull and twitch. His expression was forbidding and a bit frightening. "You were with Kassa? Why? Did you have some business with him?"

Toto nodded. "I had hoped that Kassa would talk to you about this. We wanted to show him what we were seeing, since he's an honest observer and would relay what he saw to you as precisely as he could. But it seems like that won't be possible now, so it falls on me to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I have seen a great wave," Toto said. "It comes from our mother, the Yusa Mountains, and may swallow us all whole."

"A great wave?" Kaguro asked.

“Yes. Strange things occur in the mountains when it becomes spring in Noyook, as it is now.” Toto paused. He was thinking about how many secrets he should reveal. “Do you know about Noyook?” he asked.

Kaguro’s frown deepened. “My grandmother was once walking on the mountain, and she said she reached a warm and sunny spot she’d never seen before while she was walking. She called it Noyook. Is that the same thing as what you’re talking about?”

Toto smiled slightly. “Yes, it is the same thing. We live in two worlds that are connected, but not the same. Most people can’t ever see Noyook, which is the other world, but some can. But Noyook is all around us; it overlaps our world. The Mountain King is only visible in Noyook.”

Kaguro blinked. As a King’s Spear, it was forbidden for him to speak of something as holy and secret as the Mountain King.

Toto sensed Kaguro’s nervousness and continued speaking. “A month ago, Noyook’s river began flowing from the south to the north. It crossed the Misty Blue Mountains and flowed into this land. It joined our rivers and connected to the Yusa Mountains.

“To us Herders, the river of Noyook appears to be overflowing. The water level has reached the top of Mount Okkul.”

Kaguro blinked again. Okkul wasn’t a terribly high mountain, but it also wasn’t one that people could climb easily. He could see it out of the window of this room; white snow glittered on its peak. The avalanche today had occurred halfway up Mount Okkul.

“Was today’s avalanche caused by something in Noyook?” Kaguro asked.

Toto nodded deeply. “Yes. Spring came to Noyook several years ago now, but spring lasts for a long time in Noyook--some say as long as a century. Noyook’s water is much warmer than it usually is, and some of that warmth carries over into our world. I’m sure you’ve noticed that yourself. Doesn’t this winter seem unusually warm?”

Kaguro nodded. Kanbal’s winters were usually cold and harsh, but this year, it seemed like winter had never even come. The snow hadn’t

hardened to ice on the mountains, which made avalanches much more likely.

Toto's expression clouded over; he looked down. "Spring in Noyook is usually something to celebrate," he said. "A sacred ceremony known as the marriage of the spirits occurs in Noyook's spring. Many spirits gather together and join in the dance..."

Toto lifted his head. "But for us, who live in the mountains or on the surface, spring in Noyook is a terrifying time."

"Why?" Kaguro asked.

"The mountains are covered in water. At the end of the marriage of the spirits, our land will be engulfed by an enormous wave of water from Noyook. Mountains will shake. Some may crumble. New seas and rivers will form."

Kaguro saw genuine fear in Toto's eyes. He swallowed.

"I've had all the Herders out in the caves, investigating and finding out all we can," Toto said. "Their reports have come back to me, even from far-off Yonto territory. Tonto and Yonga aren't underwater, at least not yet, but all of the other clan provinces are.

"It gets worse, I'm afraid," Toto said. "Yonsa lands and the King's province will be the hardest hit by the coming flood."

"Because of the mountains? Do you think they'll be destroyed by the wave?"

Toto nodded, then closed his eyes. He opened his eyes and raised his head.

"Musa clan leader. When the snow melts in spring, our country will be in trouble. We'll have our own share of floods from runoff and too much snow melting. I'm certain we'll see more rivers and lakes form, and more fissures in the mountains from the excess water. Avalanches will increase. The fields will flood; the water will weaken the earth and cause landslides. We have to flee to higher ground or we'll all die."

Kaguro looked at Toto's wrinkled face. He pursed his lips and said, "I don't believe you."

Toto frowned severely. “You must believe me. The Herders sensed an avalanche that would have killed many of your people in the village today without their warning. None of my people want to leave their homes, either, but we must all flee before our homes are flooded.”

Toto and Kaguro looked at one another for a long moment.

“You say that we must flee,” Kaguro said. “Where? You just said that this disaster will engulf the entire nation.”

“West,” Toto said. “There are few people there, and the mountains are steep, but very high. No one lives there now.”

“West, you say?” Kaguro asked, but Toto didn’t allow Kaguro to speak over him.

“I told you that the Yonsa clan’s lands and the King’s province will be at the greatest risk,” Toto said.

Kaguro went pale. “What will happen to the King’s province?”

“The royal palace is on high ground in the mountains, so there’s a chance that the people who live inside will be all right. But the village below the palace is in danger.” Toto paused, then nodded as if he’d just committed himself. “And my people are worried about the Mountain King and the marriage of the spirits.”

Kaguro’s eyes widened. Toto kept speaking quietly.

“The Mountain King’s Hall is directly underneath the royal palace,” Toto said. “The ceremony of the marriage of the spirits will culminate in the Mountain King’s Hall. We Herders don’t know what will happen, but it may be that the Mountain King’s Hall will be the place where the wave is released.”

Toto glanced up at Kaguro. “We have a legend that during the last marriage of the spirits, the earth beneath the palace moved, water overflowed, and a huge rainbow lit the sky. It’s embarrassing to admit, but my people don’t know anything else about this ceremony.”

Kaguro rubbed his chin and sank deeply into thought. He shook his head in irritation. “Even if I decide to believe you, it’s impossible to relocate all of the people in the province. And if you’re right, we aren’t

the only ones who need to flee to higher ground. The Yonsa clan and the King's people might need to as well." Kaguro looked down and kept speaking, more to himself than to Toto. "If this were any other year, the people could flee south to New Yogo or Rota, at least until the flooding was over. This is terrible timing."

Toto's forehead creased. "Fleeing to Rota is fine, but New Yogo will also be underwater."

"I understand," Kaguro spat. "You're saying that New Yogo will disappear."

"Not the entire country," Toto said, "but the Misty Blue Mountains are like our own. They'll have too much snowmelt and flood in spring, too, and Noyook's river also flows through it. New Yogo might suffer flooding and destruction before we do."

Kaguro looked at Toto in silence. This was an issue that couldn't be ignored. Fear spread from the pit of Kaguro's stomach that he couldn't quite suppress.

"So our people will have to face the threat of the flood, or the threat of war in Rota," he said quietly. Kanbal's people were trapped between disasters; there was no escape.

The Herders didn't seem to know that New Yogo would be attacked by Talsh soon, and that Kanbal had gotten tangled up in their problems. Kaguro wondered what the King was thinking--not for the first time.

Kaguro covered his face with his hands. N*o matter what happens, I have to protect the Musa clan*. He stared at the floor and thought about the best way to do that.

Part 3: Secret Plot

Chapter 1 - A Betrayer's Motives

When Balsa opened her eyes, she had no idea where she was. It was dim all around her. She heard the crackling of a fire somewhere nearby. Her face was pressed against a soft flaxen pillow; she lay on a futon stuffed with straw. Both her arms and legs were bound with thick rope.

Balsa tried to sit up, but quickly collapsed as pain shot up her back into her skull. She groaned as she forced herself in to a half-sitting position, then sat still again, reluctant to move.

“Balsa?” Chagum asked. He sat next to her on another straw futon. Like her, he was bound hand and foot, though he’d been lashed to the support beam behind him and couldn’t lie down.

Balsa squinted and looked around. She and Chagum appeared to be in some kind of storage area. The room was full of wooden barrels and dried meat hung from the ceiling. Balsa felt a strange sensation in her bound hands and stood still; there was a mouse gnawing at her ropes. More mice and rats scurried between the barrels.

There was a torch burning to her right. It hung in a metal bracket; the smoke smelled fresh and clean like pine. In the torchlight, she saw that the storage room had a small, open window. Cold air blew in through the window, making her shiver.

“Balsa, are you all right?” Chagum asked.

“I”m not sure,” she muttered. “My head hurts like hell, but it doesn’t seem swollen and nothing is broken.” When she remembered how she and Chagum had gotten here, she sighed. “I’m sorry. We should never have fallen into a trap like that. This is my fault.”

“No it’s not,” Chagum said. “You had no way of knowing that the traitor was Jiguro’s nephew.”

Balsa gasped, then bit her lip. She heard footsteps approaching. The door to the storage room creaked open, revealing Kahm, carrying a small lamp in his hand. He placed the lamp on top of a wooden barrel, then faced Balsa and Chagum. He appeared to be in pain.

“I never wanted this to happen,” Kahm said. I don’t plan to kill you, but Crown Prince Chagum has to stay here until all the plans are

complete."

Chagum's eyes burned with rage, but he didn't interrupt.

"You're a traitor," Balsa spat. "You sold your country out to the Talsh. I hope they paid you well, at least."

A muscle in Kahm's face twitched. He took a deep breath, then said heavily, "I haven't sold out Kanbal. I'm trying to protect it, and this seemed like the best way. I won't betray King Radalle or harm him in any way. The king knows my plans and supports them." His gaze was perfectly steady as he looked Balsa in the eyes.

Balsa remembered what she'd seen when she and Chagum had passed by the palace that day. A large number of riders had passed out of the palace gates. Perhaps they were headed to the battlefield in Rota--or New Yogo.

I don't think Kahm is lying.

Kahm was as straightforward a man as Jiguro; it wasn't in him to lie. She had to assume that he was telling the truth, and that King Radalle himself had decided to side with the Talsh.

Though his face twisted with something like grief, Kahm settled his shoulders and explained his reasons. "Kanbal receives fairly little news of the outside world, but I've had opportunity to travel as a messenger to Rota in the last several years. I've heard about the Talsh making inroads in Rota and Sangal.

"The Talsh are a foreign culture, but they are trustworthy and honest when it comes to doing business. They were interested in buying our luisha, despite the limitation in supply. They told us before they conquered Sangal, to explain the sudden shift in market prices, and they told us when they intended to attack Rota and New Yogo as well. If New Yogo falls to the Talsh, our nation will be invaded next--unless we surrender.

"Kanbalese warriors are strong. If it came to war, they would sell their lives dearly, as would I. The Talsh greatly outnumber us, but in the mountains, we could drag out the war for months or even years, hunting and hiding and springing ambushes--but why?"

Kahm looked at Balsa with slightly hooded eyes. “I’m sure you understand,” he said. “I don’t want Kanbal to suffer through a protracted war. If New Yogo and Rota are strapped for supplies and can’t send aid to us, we’ll starve--but not if we have Talsh help. How else am I supposed to protect Kanbal and its people? The most important duty of a King’s Spear is to protect the king and the kingdom, no matter the cost.”

Kahm paused, then said, “We want to protect what’s sacred to us--even from the Talsh. The King’s Spears, myself included, keep thinking of the best ways to do that.”

Chagum looked confused, but Balsa seemed to understand Kahm’s meaning. If the Talsh invaded Kanbal, they would destroy the royal palace. The Mountain King’s Hall was directly underneath it, so it was possible that the Talsh would infiltrate that, as well. If the Talsh set foot in that place, the Mountain King would close the doors of the Hall, and the people would be denied luisha forever.

The Mountain King’s Hall was especially sacred to the King’s Spears, who would become the hyoulu, guardians of the darkness, after their deaths. The hyoulu guarded the Mountain King’s Hall and the luisha; the current King’s Spears had to fight them to receive luisha in a special ceremony. By protecting Kanbal from invasion, Kahm was fulfilling his vow to the King of Kanbal to protect the secret of where luisha came from.

“But this is a temporary solution,” Balsa said. “When Talsh conquers Rota and New Yogo, they’ll come to conquer you, too, even if they don’t invade with an army. You’ll have to give the luisha over to them eventually.”

Kahm was about to answer when Chagum cut in: “The Talsh probably promised Kanbal the right to govern themselves as long as they surrender the country without a fight.”

Kahm flinched.

Chagum looked Kahm straight in the eyes. “Am I wrong? You plan to give up on the rest of the continent in order to save yourselves. Is that

it?"

Kahm balled his hands into fists. "Forgive my rudeness," he said, "but you are a foreigner and a stranger in our land. I've been ordered to protect my country by the king himself, and I will follow those orders, even if they kill me."

Chagum looked at Kahm, frowning deeply. "I don't know your orders," he said, "but I do know one thing. The Talsh won't let you govern yourselves, no matter what they've promised. You've been tricked into giving up before you even tried to fight. I've seen what they do the nations they conquer with my own eyes, and I don't expect Kanbal to be any different."

Chagum's face was bright red. His eyes glittered with tears that hadn't yet fallen. Balsa looked calmly at him and listened.

"Do you have any idea what the Talsh are like?" Chagum asked, his voice so loud that he was almost yelling. "I do. I was captured by a Talsh spy and forcibly taken to the southern continent to meet with Second Prince Raul."

Kahm tilted his head, clearly interested in what Crown Prince Chagum had to say.

"The Talsh Empire is huge and wealthy. I expect you know that much, and I can confirm that it's true. It's much larger and richer than any nation on the northern continent. But their wealth is gained through warfare--conquering their neighbors and conscripting the people into their enormous armies. They tax the subordinate nations that they conquer cruelly to pay for their wars. Have you considered what will happen to Kanbal under Talsh rule at all?"

Kahm pursed his lips. "That's something we can figure out once it actually happens," Kahm said. "The future is still uncertain."

"Prince Raul made me the same offer that he made you," Chagum said. "I read the offer. The people of Kanbal would be severely taxed if their sons and fathers don't agree to be conscripted into the Talsh army. That will be the future if you keep going down this path."

Chagum's voice shook with rage. "Do you think I'm lying? Why won't you listen? My country will fall to the Talsh first--it's inevitable. Can you imagine how it feels for me, knowing that my people are dying and their homes and villages are being burned at this very moment? Prince Raul threatened to cut off my mother's ears and slaughter my younger siblings in front of me. Do you think that my desire to protect my country is any less sincere than yours?"

"Then why did you refuse to ally yourself with Prince Raul?" Kahm asked.

Chagum started him down and answered, word by slow word. "Because what they offered wasn't protection or peace. If I had agreed, my people would have joined the Talsh army. They would have been used to attack Rota and Kanbal. It's what happened to Sangal, when their navy was used against New Yogo. Does that sound like I would have had the right to govern New Yogo to you?"

Chagum took a deep breath. "You've fallen into Talsh's trap. Their continent is played out. They've sailed north in search of new riches. If they decide that they want Kanbal for themselves badly enough, they'll attack it, too.

"Don't you understand?" Chagum asked. "Sangal was promised peace, too, and they're building fortifications at ever port from the Moon Palace to Manon. The exact same thing would have happened to New Yogo, and it's going to happen to Kanbal, too. By surrendering without a fight, you defang yourselves. You won't be able to defend Kanbal from the effects of Talsh conquering and ruling over it."

Kahm stared at Chagum for a long moment, then squared his shoulders. "Is that why you chose war? Against an army of two hundred thousand men? The choice is to be utterly crushed and destroyed, or to live and hope for a better future. Which would you choose?"

"I never believed that the King's Spears were cowards until this moment," Chagum said venomously. "You can't say you've lost the war when the battle hasn't even started yet. If Rota and Kanbal join forces, it's possible that you can beat back a Talsh invasion. Geographically,

both nations create a wall that will be difficult for them to push through thanks to the mountains and the terrain. And this is our home. We should be willing to fight for it."

Kahm glared at Chagum. "An alliance with Rota is something that King Radalle considered, but King Yosam of Rota is gravely ill and half of the clan lords who serve him are in open revolt. The wealthy southern clan lords have allied themselves with Talsh; the poor and weak northern lords can't possibly hope to win, especially with Prince Ihan in charge. We would lose--and I don't like to imagine a future for Kanbal where we lost to the Talsh." He swallowed.

Chagum chuckled nastily.

Kahm blinked in surprise. "Is something funny?" he asked.

Chagum kept smiling, but he was no longer laughing. He shook his head. "I was just thinking that you sound exactly like Lord Suan's son in southern Rota. Are you just parroting what he said to you? Because he said the same thing to me. It sounds to me like you're believing the word of the southern lords without evidence, just because they say that what they think is true.

"So I'll tell you something," Chagum said. "The Talsh forces in Rota aren't working under Prince Raul. They're working under Crown Prince Hazar. There's infighting among the Talsh over who will get the spoils after the war is over. I heard this from the Kashal, who are spies for Rota's royal family."

Kahm's forehead creased in confusion. "So what? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Kahm, watch out!" Balsa cut in. A dark shadow moved in the doorway behind him. Kahm turned to face his attacker, but they were faster and jabbed him in the side of the neck with the hilt of a sword. Kahm collapsed to the floor and didn't move.

The attacker was an unfamiliar Yogoese man. He doused the floor with oil, then dumped more oil over Kahm's unconscious body. The Yogoese man took the sputtering torch from its wall bracket, then bent down and set the oil on the floor on fire. Kahm still didn't move.

When the man drew his sword, Balsa and Chagum noticed that the blade was thick and curved, like those used by Talsh assassins that had pursued them before. The blade glinted in the light of the fire.

Balsa shoved herself toward Chagum with all her might. She felt the rope binding her hands snap, then pushed down the ropes holding her legs together and sprang to her feet.

Chagum was so numb with fear that he couldn't move. The assassin approached with his sword drawn, ready to cut down Chagum at any moment. The second his sword fell, Balsa was there, sandwiched between the assassin's blade and Chagum. The sword went through the rope she held. In the split second that the assassin prepared to make another strike, Balsa brought her knee into his gut hard enough to make him gasp.

The assassin coughed blood and gasped, looking up at Balsa in pale-faced shock. He put his sword out in front of him and swiped at Balsa. She side-stepped the strike, then settled herself into a fighting pose with her left arm placed forward. Chagum thought she had avoided the slash, but her arm was bleeding.

Is Balsa going to sacrifice her left arm to save me? Chagum thought.

This was usually the moment when he would pass Balsa her spear, but his hands were bound and her spear was nowhere that he could see. Chagum glanced desperately around the room, searching for a weapon, but he found none, so he did the only thing that he could think to do: he kicked out at the assassin with his bound feet.

By good luck, Chagum startled a rat, who leaped high and landed on the assassin's sword-hand with a high-pitched screech before scrambling to the floor again to hide.

In that brief moment of distraction, Balsa made her move. She charged at his stomach, seizing his sword wrist in both hands and twisting hard, attempting to break his arm. The assassin twisted with her and wound up slamming head-first into the wall. He stumbled against one of the barrels in the room and tumbled over.

At that exact moment, Kahm's clothing caught on fire.

Balsa grabbed the assassin's sword and cut Chagum's ropes. Then she gripped Kahm's arms and started to pull him out of the fire. Chagum grabbed his legs and helped Balsa lift him. Balsa stomped out his smoldering sleeve, then checked him for injuries. He was still unconscious.

"Get out of here, Chagum," Balsa said. "It's isn't safe. I'll bring Kahm. You go ahead of us."

"No," Chagum said. "You're still hurt, so I'll carry Kahm." He crouched down next to Kahm, then lifted him on his shoulder. Kahm grunted, but he didn't open his eyes. Chagum shuffled over to the door and into a narrow, drafty hallway. He shivered as cold wind from outside cut through him. He could see the wall of Kahm's castle; Balsa and Chagum had been locked in a storage area far removed from the main living areas.

Chagum carried Kahm a little way down the hall, then felt his own knees go out from under him.

"Chagum?" Balsa asked. Her hand bit into his shoulder and turned him to face her. She gestured for them to go back to the storage room; he nodded.

The room was still burning when they entered. The assassin lay unconscious on the floor, not yet burning, but he would if the fire spread much farther. "I'll get him out of here," Chagum said. He lifted the assassin by the shoulders and settled him outside the door of the storage room. Balsa followed.

When Chagum put the assassin down, Balsa punched him once, hard, in the chest. He showed no reaction, so Balsa let him be and guided Chagum toward the stairs that led into the main castle. She saw no sign of anyone, but she got an uneasy feeling halfway up the stairs and stopped.

"Balsa, it's all right," someone said in Rotan. "There's no one in this part of the castle but you and Chagum. You're safe."

Balsa climbed the stairs cautiously, then took the path outside to the courtyard. Two Kashal were crouched in the shadow of a tree. One was

a young man who hero-worshiped Shihana; the other was Chikari, the woman who had tended Balsa's wounds.

Balsa checked that there were no other people in the garden before approaching the Kashal. Chikari rubbed her chin and her hands, trying to warm them up.

"We need help," Balsa said. "There's a fire below. If we don't get Kahm out, he could burn to death, or just inhale too much smoke and die."

The young Kashal man nodded and vanished down the stairs. When he reappeared again, he was carrying Kahm. He brought up the assassin as well, with Chagum's help. Then he removed rope from his pack and bound the assassin's hands firmly behind his back.

That done, Balsa and Chagum took a rest beneath the garden's trees, sitting near Chirari. She smiled at them. "Mice can really be useful creatures, don't you think?"

Balsa's eyes widened.

"That was you?" Chagum asked in surprise.

Chirari smiled again and nodded. Some of the Kashal were capable of binding their souls to those of animals, controlling their movements and seeing through their eyes. Balsa remembered feeling the mice in the storage room gnawing on her ropes as well.

Chirari kept rubbing her chin. "You kicked me," she said to Chagum. "It still hurts, but I'll be fine."

Chagum grinned. When he'd startled that rat in the storage room, he'd been luckier than he knew.

"Are either of you hurt?" Chirari asked. "Show me your wounds."

Balsa looked down at her left arm. It was purpled with bruising at the wrist from the rough, tight ropes; the assassin's sword had also cut her in the fight. Otherwise, she had no obvious injuries. "I can still fight," she said.

The wound on her arm looked deep. It was still bleeding at the edges. Chirari removed a bandage from her pack and bound it tightly to

stop the bleeding.

“We should get that stitched as soon as possible,” Chirari said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Balsa had lost track of time in the storage room. She looked up at the sky and saw that it was well past midnight. The people in the castle should still be asleep. Kahm had visited her and Chagum in secret--if he hadn’t, she was sure that his servants and guards would be looking all over for them right now.

“Was the Talsh assassin alone?” Balsa whispered.

Chirari nodded. “There are more assassins and spies in the King of Kanbal’s palace, but that man was the only Talsh spy here, as far as we Kashal know.”

It was possible that the assassin had been Kahm’s main point of contact with the Talsh empire. It was obvious to Balsa that the assassin had also been sent to keep an eye on Kahm--and eliminate him if he showed any signs of wavering in his commitment to the Talsh.

Balsa sighed. She knew that Kahm was a traitor, but he wasn’t someone that she was used to hating.

“We should probably get going,” Balsa said. “Someone’s going to notice the fire sooner or later.”

Chirari and the young Kashal man nodded, then led Balsa and Chagum toward the rear of the courtyard. The Kashal climbed the low stone wall to the outside of the castle first, followed by Chagum. Balsa managed to climb the wall on her own, but it was very difficult due to her injury.

Balsa’s head spun as her terrible headache returned. Pain throbbed in her left arm. Balsa took a moment to master herself, then followed the Kashal and Chagum as they broke into a run down the narrow street.

Chirari took Balsa’s hand to help her keep pace; the young man took Chagum’s. Chagum focused on nothing but running. Snow swirled in the night sky as he and Balsa fled from Kahm’s castle.

Chapter 2 - A Very Dangerous Road

The Kashal guided Balsa and Chagum into the mountain forest surrounding the King of Kanbal's palace. Most of the trees were needled pines and stocky firs. They made camp in a cave that had been formed inside a cliff by erosion. The cave mouth was hidden by trees from the outside and was very difficult to spot. Chirari gathered loose stones to make a fire pit while her companion gathered kindling. She struck a flintstone to get the fire going.

It was cold in the cave, even when sitting next to the fire. Chagum's teeth chattered as he watched Chirari clean and stitch up the wound on Balsa's arm. The wound was still bleeding when Chirari removed the bandage. Somehow, the sight made Chagum feel even colder.

"This should stop hurting in a few days," Chirari said as she threaded her suture needle. "Here's something for the pain." She handed Balsa a small, round globule that she didn't recognize. "It's medicine."

Balsa shrugged, then put the medicine in her mouth. It went almost instantly numb. She swallowed in a hurry.

Chirari used a liquid medicine over Balsa's stitches that made her lose all feeling in her arm. Then she checked the stitches and the wound for infection.

By the time Chirari was done treating her, Balsa was so exhausted that she could scarcely keep her eyes open. Chirari tied off Balsa's bandage, then faced Chagum.

"She'll probably get a fever tonight," Chirari said. "Can I ask you to watch over her? I'm sure she'll be fine, but it never hurts to be too careful."

"What about the other Kashal?" Chagum asked. "Shouldn't he stay up, too?"

Chirari shook her head. "He went back to Kahm's castle."

Chagum nodded slowly in understanding. If the man had already returned to the castle, he probably wouldn't return here tonight. "Tell

me what signs to look for," Chagum said. "I've never really watched over a sick or injured person before."

Chirari looked exhausted. She sighed, then patiently explained the warning signs that she was looking for that would indicate that Balsa's wound needed more care. She left the cave to check the perimeter, leaving Chagum alone with a sleeping Balsa.

Chagum was tired, too, but he rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. He focused on Balsa and staying awake. There was a pot of stew boiling over the fire, but Chagum made no move to eat it, even though he'd eaten nothing since noon. Kahm's remembered words echoed in his mind.

If the King of Kanbal is already working with Talsh and knows everything, then nothing I say is going to make a difference.

The riders that had emerged from the palace that day must have something to do with Kahm's plan. Chagum wasn't sure if going to the royal palace of Kanbal was a viable option now. Kahm seemed to be prepared for everything. He'd anticipated Chagum's arrival and had imprisoned him. King Radalle would probably deal with Chagum in the same way. If he and Balsa rode up to the palace gates, they'd just be captured again.

Balsa wasn't in good fighting shape, either. They stood some chance at escape with the Kashal helping, them, but Chagum doubted they'd be able to flee from Kanbal if King Radalle sent the King's Spears and his army after them. Balsa would try anyway and probably get herself killed.

Chagum watched over Balsa, who was deeply asleep. Her mouth was half-open and her breathing was ragged. He'd never seen her sleep in such a vulnerable, unguarded way before. He remembered Balsa towering over him as a boy, but he was taller than she was now. She seemed smaller and thinner than he remembered--but what he remembered was a giant: the strongest person in the world.

And perhaps she still was all that, but not at the moment. The assassin had wounded her severely. She was an injured woman who

needed rest and time to heal. She was the kind of person who would do anything to survive, even if it meant sacrificing pieces of herself in the process. Since childhood, she'd toed the thin line between life and death, safety and danger. Chagum remembered that she'd refused to name her horse because of the inevitable pain of parting with it.

You've lived this way your whole life...

Chagum felt sad and almost sorry for her, but he also felt rage on her behalf. He placed his hand on her forehead to check that she didn't have a fever and found it cool to the touch. Though he tried to stay awake as long as possible, his eyes slipped closed without him wanting it, and he only awoke when he felt Balsa shift nearby.

Balsa opened her eyes slowly. Chagum checked her temperature; she'd developed a fever just like Chirari had said. Chagum melted fresh snow in a pot and had Balsa drink cold water. He wiped away her sweat with a clean cloth, then soaked another cloth in cold water and placed it on her forehead.

"Thank you," Balsa said with a slight smile. She closed her eyes.

Chagum stared at her, worried, until she fell asleep and her breathing evened out.

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Chagum slept again, then woke when he heard Chirari return. The faint light of dawn filtered through the trees in front of the cave mouth. Chirari was shivering violently when she entered; she rushed over to the fire and placed her palms over it, sighing deeply.

Her eyes alighted on Chagum. She retrieved a furled sheet of parchment from her breast pocket, then passed it to Chagum. "This is from our captain, for you," she said.

After Chagum accepted the message, Chirari blew into her hands, then rubbed them together. "Forgive me, but I need to sleep for a few

hours. I brought cheese and bam," she said, pushing her pack over to Chagum, "so feel free to eat without me."

Chirari pulled a fur-lined blanket from her pack, then stretched out. She was asleep in seconds; Chagum heard her soft snoring.

Chagum opened the message and read it through, his eyes devouring the words at top speed. When he finished reading, he went very pale and set it aside.

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When Balsa awoke, Chagum was leaning on the wall of the cave near the entrance. The light filtering through the trees in front of the cave mouth cast a complicated pattern on the floor. Chagum held a piece of rolled-up parchment in his fist. He was looking at her like he still wasn't sure if she was awake.

"What's that?" Balsa asked, pointing to the parchment.

"Prince Ihan gave me an answer," Chagum said.

"Did he refuse the alliance?" Balsa asked.

Chagum shook his head. "It's all what he said before: he won't make an alliance with me because I'm not the Mikado, but he promises to agree to an alliance with the King of Kanbal. If their cavalry forces unite, they should he able to protect the northern continent."

"Isn't that a good answer?" Balsa asked with a frown. "Were you hoping for something else?"

Chagum sighed. "He sent another message along with his answer. The Talsh navy has been sighted along the Sangal peninsula, along the border with New Yogo. They attacked New Yogo's navy of fifty ships with a fleet of one hundred and fifty warships. New Yogo's navy was decimated. The war has begun."

Balsa's eyes widened.

Chagum's shoulders shook as he said, "Twenty thousand Talsh soldiers just landed on the Sangal peninsula. They're fortifying their

position and preparing to move. They already had twenty thousand mounted warriors in Sangal, so this force will be added to that. The summer winds are favorable for sailing from the south to the north right now. I expect more Talsh forces will start arriving soon.

"New Yogo was supposed to give their answer to Talsh on the twelfth day of spring. Land forces will attack New Yogo within the month."

Chagum stood with his back against the cave wall, as still as a statue.

Balsa sat up, leaped to her feet and exited the cave. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, but that wasn't enough to keep her warm. She shivered as she took in her surroundings. She was dizzy from blood loss and the wound on her arm hurt. Her head ached horridly.

Balsa fought back her pain and a lingering sense of nausea, then collected fresh snow in her hands and brought it back to the cave to melt it in a pot over the fire. She felt somewhat refreshed after drinking the water and eating a bit of the hardened honey candy from her pack.

Balsa didn't bother to keep quiet while she ate and drank, but Chirari stayed asleep, still snoring softly. She finished her small meal and went outside again. Snow and ice glittered brilliantly on the trees surrounding the cave. Chagum stood underneath one; he was looking at her. His eyes were red and puffy, but he wasn't crying anymore.

"I'm going home to New Yogo," Chagum said.

Balsa just stared at him.

“The King of Kanbal is already working with Talsh,” he said. “There’s no way that he’ll agree to combine his cavalry forces with Rota’s. There’s nothing left for me to do but to return home and wait for the Talsh to overrun New Yogo’s forces.”

Chagum’s eyes were cold. Balsa saw firm resolution and anger in them. If she didn’t know any better, she’d consider the idea that Chagum was actually planning to kill his father to save New Yogo.

A cloud passed overhead, turning the brilliant white snow and ice to a leaden gray color. Chagum felt the burden of so many needless deaths on his conscience. He had to set aside his dream for peace and be what his country needed him to be: a politician and a statesman.

In some ways, Chagum was seeing the situation clearly for the first time, but he thought that there was nothing waiting for him down this road but despair and darkness. New Yogo would fall. Talsh would win. It was over. His best option was to kill his father and ally with the Talsh, but then his people would be conscripted and go to war in Rota and Kanbal. That wasn't a good option at all.

Balsa wasn't sure what Chagum should do in this situation. She had an idea, but it was risky and difficult and might not spare Chagum any pain or tragedy in the long run. They had a month to act before the war began in earnest. Balsa intended to use that time, and she hoped Chagum would agree to try her plan.

There was a muffled sound from the trees; Chirari poked her face out and waved. "What are you doing all the way out here?" she asked. When neither Chagum nor Balsa said anything in response, she shrugged, then returned to the cave.

Balsa glanced at the cave, then turned her full attention on Chagum. "Chagum," she said, "what if there was a way for us to meet with the King of Kanbal, away from prying eyes and Talsh spies? Would you do it?"

Chagum looked surprised. "Is that possible?" he asked.

"There is a way, but it's complicated," she said. "But if you give me three days, we can give it a try."

Chagum frowned. "You're still so pale, Balsa. You shouldn't travel today."

Balsa gave him a fierce smile, but the planes of her face were as sharp as her spear's point. She was utterly serious when she said, "Right now, a day is more precious than luisha. We'll regret it if we wait, so tell me your answer now."

Chagum gaped at her and didn't reply.

Balsa turned around and went back to the cave. Chirari checked her wounds and gave her more water to drink.

"Thank goodness," Chirari said. "The wound's not infected, and it's stopped bleeding. But you still have a fever, so you must rest."

Chagum returned to the cave just after Chirari wrapped Balsa's arm in a clean bandage. He faced Balsa squarely and said, "I have to choose the path that protects the most people. If you know how we can do that, then I'll follow you wherever you go."

Chapter 3 - Radalle's Weakness

The royal palace of Kanbal seemed so much emptier with the riders from all the clans gone. The new year decorations were still in place, festooning the walls, but they contrasted sharply with the hard expressions on the faces of the palace guards. No one really felt like celebrating.

The echoes of footsteps and horses' hooves filled the entrance hall. King Radalle could hear people and horses moving from his secluded study deeper inside the palace. The light filtering in from his window was slight and thin due to thick gray clouds. The air smelled like snow.

There was a large fire set inside the study. Unlike the large and sturdy hearths that were used by most of Kanbal's clan lords, this one was delicately carved and designed for decoration as well as function. Fat logs burned in the fire's center, belching smoke.

Even the large fire wasn't enough to chase the cold and the darkness of winter away. King Radalle sank deeply in his cushioned seat, facing his visitor. He was a messenger from the Talsh Prince Hazar, a Yogoese man in his late twenties with a nervous expression. His eyes shifted back and forth. But then he smiled, and King Radalle thought for a moment that he was sitting across from Prince Raul himself.

"The queen thanks you for your gift of a necklace," King Radalle said. "It made her very happy."

The Talsh messenger smiled. He'd come to the royal palace two weeks before to propose an alliance between the southern lords of Rota and Kanbal. In the time he'd been there, he had discovered a good deal about Kanbal's government and economic circumstances.

"Your words gladden me, but there's really no need to thank me," Prince Hazar's spy said. "Consider it a token of appreciation. Your assembled cavalry were a wonder to behold. I hope to learn your

preferences so that we can best help and support one another." The man spoke Kanbalese smoothly, but with a slight accent.

"The more I learn about Kanbal, the more I sympathize with your struggles as its ruler. Kanbal's clan lords are strong and tough, but also isolated, from you and one another. They are fierce and splendid warriors, but I feel that they're worthy of much more praise and support--as are you, King Radalle."

King Radalle gave the Talsh messenger a bitter smile. "You're a smooth talker; I'll give you that. I hear what lies behind your words. It would be difficult to subdue us by force due to our cavalry forces. You hope to use them in your own war efforts." His tone was firm, but truthfully, he was exhausted to the core of himself. This exhaustion never faded these days, no matter how long he slept.

Long ago, King Radalle had asked Yuguro Musa for advice whenever he was uncertain of what to do. Yuguro was a wise man of long experience and had always given him good advice.

Yuguro's treachery and ambitions had harmed Radalle as well as himself. He had never fully recovered his mind after what had happened to him in the Mountain King's Hall. He had become indecisive--hesitant and uncertain where before he had been solid and sure. Radalle missed his old friend and counselor now more than ever.

King Radalle knew that he was a weak king that didn't command the respect of his nation's warriors, or even his own protectors, the King's Spears. None of them had allowed Radalle to confide in them. The only hint he ever received that the King's Spears disagreed with him was when they sighed or whispered behind his back.

Radalle suspected that he was always tired because of his lack of support. Every decision had to be made by him, and all the consequences were his to shoulder. He rubbed his raw, red eyes.

"Your Majesty," Prince Hazar's messenger said, "I have said--have I not?--that I understand your suffering, and that of your people. I have traveled to many nations as a diplomat and am familiar with many

different nations and situations. I can see that you are weary and in need of aid. I have come to offer you that aid."

Radalle placed his hands in his lap and considered the Talsh spy. He had no desire to make an enemy out of him or Talsh. And he did believe that the Talsh could provide him with aid. His concern was how much it would cost.

"I believe that we can help one another," the messenger said. "If you're worried about opposition to an alliance with Talsh, please put your mind at ease. I will take care of any potential threats or betrayers for you." The man had rooted out many counter-spies in Old Yogo, so he had extensive experience in this area. "I have no desire for needless violence or bloodshed, so I will work, first, to win people to our side. If that fails, I know how to be discreet."

Radalle's expression clouded over. His father had poisoned his brother to death to assume the throne. Radalle was not a violent man, and he didn't like to think of his enemies being disposed of by violent means. He would rather have no enemies at all. He understood that the Talsh used assassination as one tool to enforce compliance. He disliked some of their policies and hated others, but they were dangerous--and far more dangerous as enemies than as friends.

King Radalle's main concern in these negotiations wasn't his own well-being, but that of his family's. His uncles and his cousin Aron were all under potential threat of assassination or sabotage if he refused Talsh's offer of an alliance. He didn't really care if he was deposed, but losing Aron, a powerful commander who the people would rally behind if he died or was captured, would shake him to the core.

King Radalle also had a small son, but his wife's health had been delicate since the birth and the boy was still very small. He still loved his wife as strongly as he had at their marriage. His chief concern in these negotiations was his family's safety.

Radalle had never wanted to become king. Now that he was, he hated the political backstabbing and threats that came along with it. He wanted to be the kind of man who wasn't afraid, no matter what

happened: to fight those who opposed him and force them to their knees.

The Talsh messenger in front of him might be able to make him into that kind of man. The thought lightened Radalle's mood somewhat. He and the messenger talked for a little while longer, then the messenger opened the door of the study to return to his specially appointed room reserved for high-ranking foreign diplomats.

A servant sat outside the door of the study; King Radalle noticed him as the Talsh ambassador was leaving. "Excuse me, Your Majesty, but I have an urgent message."

"What is it?" Radalle asked.

The servant notified him that a wing of Kahm Musa's palace had burned down the previous night. "Kahm Musa came to visit you this morning, but he took ill with a fever and returned home."

"Shiam, you idiot," the Talsh messenger muttered. "Did Crown Prince Chagum die in the fire?" he asked.

"I don't know," the servant said. "Kahm and the two others left only recently and didn't provide details."

"He probably got away," the Talsh messenger said. "Are you searching for him?"

"Searching for him? How?"

The Talsh messenger rubbed his chin. "This is a mess, but we can still salvage it, even if Shiam's been caught. Kahm did well in informing His Majesty of his blunder right away. However…"

The Talsh messenger grinned. "In this rare instance, having Your Majesty's retainers see you as hesitant and lacking courage may work in your favor. You can be swift and decisive now, and catch them all off-guard." He faced the messenger from Kahm's palace. "Inform your master that a failure to capture Crown Prince Chagum will result in the entire palace being burned, not just one wing. I've heard that the royal spies of Rota are capable of doing some truly creative things with fire."

The servant from Kahm's palace bowed and withdrew hastily.

The Talsh messenger looked out of a small window. They needed to recapture the Crown Prince quickly. He had directed many assassins as well as magic weavers to go out searching already. Many of these magic weavers could see through the eyes of hawks, allowing them to track their quarry at great speed without being easily noticed. All of their messages could reach the Talsh messenger quickly: he was the spider at the center of a web of information.

The only thing that worried him was the continued presence of the spear-wielding woman. Kahm had informed him about her, so he knew that he would have to be cautious. Kahm had no desire to fight her; she was skilled and had strong ties to Kanbal's clans.

But the woman was only a minor irritant, soon disposed of. The situation was completely under control. As the Talsh messenger looked at a hawk flying outside the window, it started to snow.

Chapter 4 - The Talsh Princes

It was summer in the Talsh capital of Rahan. Faol bushes shook in the faint breeze, their red flowers blooming and open to the sun. The Talsh Emperor watched the flowers as servants watered and tended them. He had a habit of reclining on a low chair near a stream that cut through the garden. It was a peaceful and quiet place.

Two servants stood near the old Emperor's reclining chair, cooling him with large and elaborate fans in the shape of seashells. The Emperor considered the events of his life in a melancholy manner, listening to the stream and the sound of the breeze passing over his face.

The Emperor dozed. He opened his eyes when he heard footsteps approaching. There were people standing in the shadow of a large faol shrub. They were his two sons and a collection of powerful prime ministers and officials. These were the men who would decide Talsh's future.

There was a man sitting next to the Emperor in the garden, writing something on parchment. He stood up and approached the Talsh princes and prime ministers. This man was Aiol, the chief prime minister of the Talsh Emperor, called the Minister of the Sun. Aoil had a Talsh name, but he was not, by birth, a Talsh citizen.

The Talsh Emperor and Aoil had met in an army tent on a battlefield. There had been war with the kingdom of Koranam then; the Talsh army had crushed Koranam's utterly. The King of Koranam came to the tent of the Talsh Emperor to surrender. He signed over his lands and affixed his seal to the bottom of the treaty.

The Talsh Emperor usually had an excellent memory for important events, but he couldn't remember what the King of Koranam's face had looked like in that moment at all. But he did remember the face of the young man standing in the corner of the tent with perfect clarity.

Aoil was the son of the King of Koranam's mistress. His father was a bumbling incompetent, so he'd been controlling most matters of governance in Koranam from a young age. While the King of Koranam

had looked on the Talsh conquerors with fear, Aoil had looked at the Talsh Emperor with an expression of sincere interest and genuine respect.

It had been more than forty years since that day. Aoil had helped the Talsh Empire bring eight more kingdoms under Talsh dominion since that time.

“Your sons say that the heat is unbearable and that they would prefer to speak to you inside,” Aoil whispered.

“No; I’m comfortable here,” the Talsh Emperor said. “Let them approach.”

The Talsh princes came in front of their father’s reclining chair, got to their knees and bowed their heads. The princes didn’t look much like siblings. Prince Hazar resembled his mother; he had a large build and a slender face. Prince Raul looked much more like the Talsh Emperor, with a slight build that was common among the Talsh people. There was something threatening and intimidating in Prince Raul’s aura. He had always been a man on fire, consumed by his passions.

“Areh’s blessings upon you, honored father,” Hazar and Raul said together. They lifted their heads.

The Emperor told them to speak freely. The two servants bearing fans were entirely deaf, but when Aoil gave the signal that the princes would be staying for a while, they set their fans aside and brought out chairs for the princes. The princes seated themselves before their father; their counselors and stood behind them.

Prince Raul and Prince Raul were often at odds; the officials who supported the princes always disagreed on policy decisions. Kurz, the official who controlled the northern army, stood at Prince Raul’s right side. Hamil, the official controlling the southern army, stood near Prince Hazar. Hamil’s skin was jet black; like Aoil, he wasn’t born a Talsh citizen, but was recruited from the foreign nation of Karal.

The assembled officials all bowed to the Emperor, then sat down and waited a little distance away from him and the two princes.

The garden wasn't the best place for a private conference. Aside from the faol bushes, there was no cover. That was why the Emperor's servants couldn't hear. Important matters of state must be kept secret.

"Are you well, father?" Prince Raul asked.

The Talsh Emperor smiled. "Very well, thank you."

In the Talsh Empire, the oldest son didn't get preferential treatment for inheriting their father's rule. The Talsh Emperor had full authority in choosing his successor. Prince Raul addressed his father before Prince Hazar because he had conquered more nations and provinces and distinguished himself more in political and military matters than his older brother.

"How is the invasion of the northern continent progressing?" the Talsh Emperor asked hoarsely.

Prince Raul gave him a brief, comprehensive report. When he finished speaking, the Talsh Emperor shifted his gaze to Prince Hazar.

"You look like you want to say something, Hazar," the Talsh Emperor said. "What is it?"

Prince Hazar smiled a little. "Father, the seeds I planted many years ago as a young man are, at last, bearing fruit. I believe I will be able to protect my brother from betrayal if my plan is successful."

Prince Raul looked at his brother. Prince Hazar smiled calmly back at him, then said, "My brother's invasion is going splendidly, but there is one weakness. We can't dismiss the military might of the northern continent. Individually, New Yogo, Rota, and Kanbal are weak, but if they banded together, they might successfully repel an invasion." Prince Hazar paused, folding his hands in his lap.

"Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo fled from my brother's custody. My spies inform me that he is attempting to orchestrate an alliance between King Radalle of Kanbal and Prince Ihan of Rota. It's unlike you to allow such a thing to happen right under your nose, brother."

Prince Hazar was inwardly frustrated at Prince Raul's preferential status, but he didn't let it show on his face.

“I thank you for your concern, Hazar,” Prince Raul said with a wolfish smile, “but there’s no need to worry. My own spies have informed me that Prince Ihan refused the alliance. Crown Prince Chagum has been declared dead in New Yogo; he has no authority. Who would ever agree to listen to him now? He fled to Kanbal because Prince Ihan refused to hear him. I expect he’ll get the same treatment from the King of Kanbal.”

Hazar opened his mouth to say something, but the Talsh Emperor spoke first. “Hazar, you spoke of seeds sown long ago. Do not bore me with long metaphorical explanations. Cut straight to the heart of the matter.”

“Yes, father,” Prince Hazar said. “When I learned of the illness of King Yosam in Rota many years ago, I sought to make use of it. We have had dealings with the southern clan lords of Rota for decades, and now, Rota is in the middle of a civil war. The south has all the money and all the troops; they will win. Kanbal is already committed to our side. We’ve as good as won, father.”

Everyone seemed surprised at Prince Hazar’s words. No one had suspected him of interfering with Rota’s politics for such a long time. Kurz, still standing at Prince Raul’s side, went pale.

There was a long silence. The Talsh Emperor broke it. “Splendidly done, Hazar,” he said with tears of admiration in his eyes. “Is this the reason why you and your brother divvied up Rota in the first place, to better leverage Rota’s unstable politics against its neighbors, Kanbal and New Yogo?”

“I fear my explanation is incomplete, father,” Prince Hazar said. “I manipulated only southern Rota and Kanbal. Prince Raul still deserves credit for his work in conquering northern Rota and New Yogo.” His expression was complicated. He wanted to extol his own exploits, but he couldn’t risk misstating his role and stealing all the credit from Prince Raul. “We now have northern Rota and Kanbal at our mercy.”

Prince Raul didn’t interrupt. Prince Hazar and the Talsh Emperor felt no aura of threat from him, but it was clear to everyone what Prince

Hazar was saying. The key to conquering the northern continent was to subjugate Rota, the largest and richest nation--and Prince Hazar was responsible for its current state of vulnerability. It was Prince Raul's plan to conquer New Yogo before focusing on Rota, but that didn't make Prince Hazar's plan a bad strategy.

"If we have Rota, then we have a foothold," the Talsh Emperor said. "We can land troops and set up supply routes."

It wasn't praise, exactly, but Prince Hazar blushed and ducked his head as if he were accepting a serious compliment. "Exactly, father," he said. "If you give me leave to deploy the southern army, I'll have them in Rota as soon as possible. Or we can use the men who have already landed in Sangal--twenty thousand or so. Just give the word, and I will conquer Rota for you within a month of landing."

Prince Raul could make no protest. *Is this why he put out so many feelers in Kanbal?* he thought. *To trap northern Rota for an easy conquest?* Prince Raul was usually a better strategist than his brother, but this tactic was one that Prince Raul hadn't seen coming.

Raul felt his father's eyes on him.

"What do you think, Raul?" the Talsh Emperor asked. "Will you share military authority with your brother?"

Prince Raul froze still. If he agreed, then Prince Hazar would get full credit for conquering Rota. It would become much easier for Prince Raul to conquer New Yogo with increased troops and supply lines established. But Prince Raul didn't want to share any part of the northern continent with his brother. Prince Hazar was like a child who'd snatched the tastiest morsel at dinner before anyone else could have a piece.

Prince Hazar's strategy, while good, wasn't foolproof. There were problems with it; enough for Prince Raul to form a pretext to keep his armies off of the northern continent.

"No, father," Prince Raul said. "Dividing military authority on the continent isn't a sound strategy."

The people surrounding Prince Raul were somewhat startled by the firm decisiveness in his voice.

“If my esteemed brother already has Kanbal well in hand, we have no need for more soldiers to conquer the continent. Once Kanbal is firmly in our hands, Rota will soon follow--it’s already tearing itself apart from the inside out. Why should we waste more men and resources on a campaign when it’s a foregone conclusion that we’ll win?’

Hazar went pale. Raul continued speaking strongly and confidently.

“My army is in New Yogo now; I intend to bring it under control quickly. I thank you, brother, for causing such unrest in Rota; you’ve saved me a lot of trouble. I pray that everything will go just as smoothly as you said.”

Raul gave Hazar an unsettling smile, then faced his father.

“We are Talsh, and born to conquer,” Raul said. “I swear that we will completely subjugate the northern continent, father. You have my word.”

The Emperor remained silent for a long moment, looking at his sons with bright, interested eyes. “Is that so?” he asked at long length. “I’m looking forward to it.”

The princes consulted with their own advisors, then withdrew. When they were all gone, the Emperor beckoned to Aoil. “Which of my sons should rule after me?” he asked.

Aoil considered the two princes. “I’m not sure. They would lead the empire in different directions. It’s still not clear which one we need.”

The Emperor harrumphed.

“Prince Raul was born to conquer nations,” Aoil said. “He’s been that way since early childhood, and he is responsible for the rapid growth of the Talsh empire over the past several decades. You would think that he’d be the natural choice for your heir.”

It really is a shame that Prince Raul wasn’t born first, the Emperor thought. Silence stretched out between the Emperor and Aoil.

Raul and his advisor, Kurz, had never known any life outside of conquering other nations. Prince Raul had never had to truly understand the hearts of his people. Conquering the northern continent was different from all previous conquests because it would be the last large war that Talsh would have to fight.

Aoil wasn't sure that conquering the northern continent was a good idea. Sangal had been conquered years ago and was still resisting Talsh governance. Sangal was a seafaring nation with a large navy, but it couldn't be entirely relied upon yet.

Still, Prince Raul's strategy was undoubtedly correct. There were already plenty of men and resources on the northern continent to successfully conquer it; there was no need to send Prince Hazar with another army, which would split the responsibility--and the victory.

On the off-chance that the northern continent didn't fall to Talsh conquest, Prince Raul's reputation would take a hit, as would the strength of his claim to be the next Talsh Emperor.

Rota and Kanbal weren't the only problems. The Talsh empire itself was rife with unrest. Aoil expected that he would see more clear signs of that unrest before long.

Aoil suddenly remembered the face of a young man. He was from one of Talsh's conquered nations and had earned the trust of his Talsh overlords. He had captured the Crown Prince of New Yogo and brought him to Rahan, the capital city of the empire. He had been placed on the noble Path of Light by Prince Raul.

The young man had gone through all that trouble just so that he could meet Aoil. The more Aoil talked to the young man, the more he thought that his ideas reminded him of his own when he'd been a young man.

"The Talsh empire is like a leather bag stuffed full to bursting." There was great suffering in the young man's eyes as he said, "Talsh can't keep expanding for much longer--and really, it shouldn't. Talsh is going to have to learn to govern without relying on war and conquest to support

its economy. We need to find a way for Talsh to do that before the leather bag bursts."

What was the young man's name? Hugo?

He was from Yogo, a province that had been conquered by Prince Raul some twenty years before. He understood how the people Talsh had conquered felt better than anyone else in the Talsh court.

Aoil sighed internally. *If he were only a little older, he might have become Prince Raul's chief adviser. He could guide the Talsh empire in a different direction...*

Aoil had felt sorry for Prince Raul since his boyhood. He'd been raised in a cycle of endless conquest and killing before he'd even matured. He was like an unruly horse trampling over foreign lands; he had no experience governing a nation at peace. He was strong-willed enough to steer the empire in the wrong direction and pull it it off a cliff.

If that happened, the nobles and court ministers would have a very difficult decision to make. Aoil looked out at the summer garden as the sun set.

Part 4:

The Crown Prince's Pride

Chapter 1 - Night in the Mountains

Soft, light snow started to fall. It was only a little past noon; the sky was leaden gray with heavy, oppressive clouds. The line of the mountain ridge was lit up brightly even though everything else was in shadow.

Balsa rode her horse slowly, crouched over instead of sitting up straight. Chirari was concerned for her when they left camp, but Balsa couldn't be deterred, even by injury.

Chagum understood that they had to move as quickly as possible to make an alliance with the King of Kanbal, but the expression on Chirari's face when she'd looked at Balsa before they'd left worried him. Balsa's wounds were severe, and she still had a fever.

It was bitingly cold. Chagum urged his horse on despondently under the foreboding sky. Neither he nor Balsa were carrying any packs or luggage now. They'd had enough money to purchase new horses to replace the ones they'd lost at Kahm's castle, but there hadn't been any money left over for anything else, including food. Chirari had shared her food and medicine with Balsa and Chagum, but they only had enough food for a few more days on short rations. And without Chirari's allies among the Kashal, they would have had to travel the entire way back to Kanbal's capital city on foot.

Where are we even going?

Chagum had asked Balsa that question many times, but she didn't tell Chagum what she was planning.

"You're better off not knowing," Balsa had said the first time he'd asked. "If you knew, you wouldn't be able to hide that fact if we were questioned, and there are certain things that need to be kept secret."

Balsa revealed nothing else to Chagum She had ordered the Kashal to stay away and not follow. Balsa claimed that if the Kashal followed them, then there was no way that her plan would succeed.

Balsa had the other Kashal to ride ahead and keep watch over the royal palace. “If we don’t come out and you see riders emerging from the palace, send an urgent message to Prince Ihan in Rota so that he can prepare for war with Kanbal. The Talsh already have southern Rota in their grip; with Kanbal, they can take over northern Rota with a pincer attack.”

Chirari had gone pale at these words, but she’d nodded.

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Chagum and Balsa wore thick karru winter coats to keep them warm. Their horses shuffled through the snow at their feet. After what felt like a long journey, a village appeared in the distance. Goats grazed in pens and people hid themselves inside their squat stone houses to protect against the cold. Small huts lined the edge of the village.

Balsa pointed her horse toward the small huts. She approached one and noticed a depression on the ground that led to a storage cellar. She turned her horse toward it. As she drew closer, she heard footsteps and the bleating of goats coming from the cellar. The smell was so overwhelming that Chagum frowned.

They must have brought the goats inside for the winter, Chagum thought. He understood the advantage: goats would keep people warmer in winter, after all, but he didn’t think he’d be able to stand the stench, personally.

“Wait here,” Balsa said. She dismounted, not without difficultly; her movements were laborious and slow. She descended two steps and knocked on the door of the cellar and requested to be let in in Kanbalese. The door opened, revealing a short woman. Chagum was astonished; the woman wasn’t even tall enough to reach Balsa’s waist. He thought she was a child for a moment, but her face was that of an adult. Her hair was brown and her eyes were bright and wide open; he thought that she appeared kind and sympathetic. Some children peeked

out from behind the women; these scarcely reached Balsa's knees in terms of height.

Are these the Herder people?

Chagum had heard about them from Balsa, but he hadn't expected them to be so small.

The Herder woman started in surprise. "Kane? Maa! Maa!"

Chagum had no idea what she was saying. He tried to listen closer, but a strong wind blew her words away.

Balsa said something that made the Herder woman flinch. The woman wrung her hands, then set up a ladder that could be used to access lower levels of the house. More Herder women came up the ladder behind the first. As her friends came up from the lower cellar, the first Herder woman glanced sidelong at Chagum, then crossed the street to another hut and used her hands to whistle loudly, twice.

"What's going on?" Chagum asked Balsa.

Balsa kept looking at the whistling Herder woman when she answered, "The Herders use whistling like speech, to communicate over distances."

More Herder women appeared outside their huts. Young and old, they lined up in neat rows. They formed a ring on the snowy ground and started consulting with one another in hushed voices.

"One of the Herder woman has a cellar that connects to the royal palace," Balsa said softly. "I was hoping that she would guide us there, but she passed away last year."

"Then what will we do now?" Chagum asked.

"She had friends," Balsa said, gesturing. "They're deciding whether or not they should guide us, or only me alone."

The Herder women spoke for a long time. It was hard to wait so long in the freezing wind. While Chagum was stomping his feet to keep them warm, the Herder women seemed to come to a decision. They nodded to one another, then approached Balsa and Chagum as a group.

The oldest woman looked up at Balsa and said, “You are from Kanbal, so we have no concerns in guiding you to the palace, but we cannot guide this foreigner.”

“I came to this place so that I could lead him there,” Balsa said, calmly but firmly. “So I beg you to allow him to come as well. The lives of thousands of people depend on him getting into the palace.”

The old woman’s face crinkled in a severe frown. “It truly is hard...” She sank into thought. Some of the other women stared whistling to one another; they sounded a little like a flock of twittering birds.

The old woman thought and listened to her friends. After a long moment, she nodded, though she kept her face cast down. “All right. I’ll take you both to consult with everyone. We’ll let all the Herders decide what to do.”

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After all the Herders consulted with one another, a slightly plump woman was chosen as Balsa and Chagum’s guide. The path would be far too steep for horses, so they entrusted their mounts to the Herders until they returned. Balsa and Chagum followed the Herder woman up the steep mountain path.

Though the woman was quite short, he walked very quickly. The path was quickly choked with boulders; they had to weave in and out of animal trails and short stretches of proper road. Sometimes, she jumped from boulder to boulder, just like a mountain goat.

“Please wait,” Chagum called out to the Herder woman. “I’m not used to traveling this way, and Balsa is injured. Could you allow us to rest for a moment?”

The Herder woman turned to look at him, clearly surprised. She nodded her head. “Sorry. I forgot that the pace might be too fast for you. I was worried about reaching our destination before it was full night. Forgive me; I’ll go slower.”

Her solicitousness was also unexpected, given everything Chagum had heard and seen so far. Everything about the Herders was strange to him, but the Herder woman's kind voice brushed away much of his discomfort and unease. He still didn't know where they were going, and picking his way along the route was very difficult, but he felt like they would make it, somehow.

They rested for a while, then kept going. Balsa seized Chagum's arm from behind.

"Balsa? Are you all right?"

She nodded, but she didn't say anything. It was too dark for Chagum to be able to see much of her face, but he felt her hand trembling where it held his arm. He shifted Balsa's arm over his own shoulder and supported her as they walked.

Balsa hesitated, but then rested her entire weight on Chagum's shoulders. When he got tired, Balsa supported him instead. They climbed up the narrow, rocky path, step by slow step.

When it was fully dark, Chagum felt something warm and wet on his face. The chill in his bones was suddenly lifted away; he felt like his entire body was suspended in warm water. His shoulders shook as he saw the water of Nayugu all around him. So many spirits were swimming in the water that it was impossible to count them all. He heard Balsa's voice, but it sounded like it was coming from very far away; he couldn't tell what she was saying at all. The sound of the spirits swimming and interacting was so loud that it drowned out everything else.

Chagum closed his eyes. This is a place where Nayugu and Sagu are connected.

There was power in the water; Chagum could feel it and draw on it despite his exhaustion. He felt like his entire body was melting into Nayugu. He was warm and comfortable all over for the first time in weeks.

Balsa's voice sounded more urgent. Chagum focused on returning to Sagu before he was completely washed away in Nayugu's water.

“Chagum?” Balsa asked.

Her face was hazy in the rippling water. Chagum reached out and grabbed her thick winter karro coat before her face could fade from view. Balsa stopped moving as Chagum returned from Nayugu. Chagum stopped still and trembled violently, but he wasn’t cold.

Balsa pulled Chagum into a fierce hug. Chagum still smelled the water of Nayugu, an intense smell like the air after a heavy rainstorm. That smell brought back so many old memories...when he’d carried the water spirit’s egg, he had always smelled the water of Nayugu whenever he’d been jolted away from Sagu by the spirit.

Where am I? Close to Nayugu, obviously--am I close to the Mountain King’s Hall?

Chagum’s body suddenly felt much lighter, though he wasn’t sure why. The air in front of him rippled again; he felt like he was about to melt into Nayugu again. Chagum gritted his teeth; the sound grounded him in Sagu. Balsa was holding him tight. The world around him stopped rippling and solidified again.

“Are you all right?” Balsa whispered.

Chagum nodded, then took a step back from her. His forehead was beaded with sweat. The Herder woman guiding them looked at Chagum with a dubious expression, but when she saw that Chagum was able to move on his own again, she whistled through her fingers. What she whistled was a very complex tune different from what Chagum had heard before. The whistle lingered in the air, carried on the cold wind. Balsa and Chagum stood elbow-to-elbow and waited, staring into the darkness.

Chagum thought he saw something in the darkness ahead of him and rubbed his eyes. He held his breath as a mysterious source of light appeared in the distance, then another, then another. Herders approached with these strange lights, making no sound as they moved.

“It’s all right,” Balsa said. “It’s just more Herders.”

“Their eyes are shining...”

And they were. Chagum couldn't tell if they were shining in the illumination of the Herders' strange lights or if they glowed from within.

"The Herders see well, even in the dark," Balsa said. "They turn a poisonous plant called togal into a liquid and put it on their eyelids. It lets them see in the dark, as clear as day."

The wind carried the smell of the Herders' leather and wool clothes to Chagum's nose. The Herders gathered on a ledge slightly above Chagum and Balsa, then sat down.

One of the Herders approached Balsa. "It's been a long time. I am glad to be able to guide you again," he said.

Balsa bowed her head deeply. “I must thank you again for guiding me last time.”

The Herder nodded, then glanced briefly at Chagum before returning his attention to Balsa. “We wanted to hear your story from your own mouth before making our final decision,” he said.

Balsa told the Herders about her journey through Kanbal. She told them that Chagum was the Crown Prince of New Yogo and that the Talsh Empire was coming to invade Kanbal. She explained what she’d seen of the Kanbalese cavalry’s movements and that Chagum wanted an audience with King Radalle.

It took a long time for Balsa to explain everything, but the Herders stood still and listened without saying a word.

“If the King of Kanbal creates an alliance with the Talsh Empire, then Talsh people will come here. They will learn the secret of luisha and seek to steal it for themselves. To prevent this, Chagum intends to propose an alliance between Rota and Kanbal. This would create a defensive wall that would be difficult for the Talsh army to penetrate. The Herder people have an interest in keeping the Talsh away from Kanbal. Please help us.”

There was no immediate reply when Balsa stopped speaking. Chagum heard nothing but the sighing of the wind.

The Herders started whispering and whistling to each other. They spoke so quickly that even Balsa couldn’t understand their words, but it was clear that they were deliberating.

Chagum let out a breath that he didn’t know he’d been holding and looked around at the chaotic scene. Herders talked over one another and waved to get attention. He couldn’t even tell what the subject of their discussion was; his Kanbalese either wasn’t fluent enough, or they were speaking another language entirely.

Suddenly, all the Herders stopped speaking at once. The Herder man who had spoken to Balsa before said, “We understand why the Crown Prince is here, Balsa. We also know that our nation is in grave danger.

What you intend to do is very important. I hope that you succeed, for all our sakes.

“However, we currently have no authority to summon the King or the King’s Spears.”

“You must understand,” another Herder said from above. “We only call on the King during the Giving Ceremony, on behalf of the Mountain King. We have never summoned the King or the Spears to the Mountain King’s Hall for any other reason. We made an agreement with the King of Kanbal long ago that this would be so, and we cannot go back on our word.”

The Herders were still and silent. It was as quiet as the heart of a mountain.

Balsa felt something like genuine despair. She didn’t know what else she could say to convince the Herders.

Chagum stood up straight, still supporting Balsa. He looked out at all the Herders and said in clear Kanbalese, “Thank you for agreeing to hear us.” He looked toward Balsa. “Let’s go.”

Balsa nodded. As they turned to leave, one of the Herders called out to them, “Please rest in our huts for the night.”

Chagum stared at the man who had made the request. It was true that he and Balsa needed rest. The solemnity of the Herders and how concerned they seemed to be about ceremony and responsibility reminded him strongly of his own father, the Mikado of New Yogo. He didn’t want to rely on them when they’d refused his request to be guided to the King of Kanbal.

But it also seemed like he had no choice but to rely on them. Balsa and Chagum had no money for an inn, even if they could find one in the mountains before they froze to death. Balsa was still hurt.

“Please allow us to rest for tonight with you,” Chagum said.

The Herder who had made the suggestion for Balsa and Chagum to stay with them made some sort of signal. A boy emerged from the assembled Herders and jumped down from the snowy ledge above onto

the same level as Balsa and Chagum. He was carrying something in his hands.

“Close your eyes,” the boy said to Chagum.

Chagum did, though not without apprehension. He saw something like light dancing from behind his closed eyelids, but he couldn’t identify it.

“You can open your eyes now,” the boy said.

When Chagum opened his eyes, he blinked over and over again, trying to get his bearings. His surroundings looked completely different. Most of the world had been shrouded in darkness before, but now he could see the Herders and everything on the mountain as if it had been illuminated by a full moon.

“We ask that you wear clothing like ours--leather and furs to keep out the wind,” one of the Herders said. “Please follow us.”

Balsa and Chagum watched as the Herders shuffled back to their homes in the darkness.

Chapter 2 - The Herders

It had taken time to reach the Herders' gathering place; it took more time to reach their actual homes. Chagum was so exhausted by the time he and Balsa reached the Herder village that he was dizzy; he had to move slowly so that he wouldn't fall. By the time and and Balsa reached the house where they'd be staying, he was wild for rest. He didn't even notice the pervasive goat smell in the Herder village.

Everything in the Herders' homes was built to a miniaturized scale. Chagum's head bumped the ceiling when he entered; he bent his knees a little. Though things were small and unfamiliar, the space looked homey and felt warm. Dried goat dung burned in the hearth. Kitchen pots and pans hung on pegs. Cooking smells wafted through the air.

Several Herder children clustered around Balsa and Chagum, driven there by burning curiosity about the strangers. After the children looked the house's guests up and down, they returned to the hearth and waited for their meal.

This house was owned by three women: one young, one old, and one middle-aged. Chagum was vaguely aware that the Herder women and children were asking him questions, but he was far too exhausted to do anything more than nod.

Balsa stretched out on the floor as soon as she entered the house. She should probably have chosen a spot closer to the fire where it was warmer, but she'd fallen asleep the moment she'd closed her eyes. The Herder women had placed a blanket over her and let her be.

"I wish she'd eat first," Chagum muttered, moving to lift the blanket off of her.

The old Herder women shook her head firmly. "Let her sleep for a while. We'll take care of you both, as we agreed. A meal for you will be ready soon."

The young Herder woman was frying bam on a stone pan over a fire in the kitchen with quick, precise movements. She flipped the bam over on the pan so that it would be completely coated in the oil as it cooked. When the bam pieces were done, she placed them in a basket to the side of the pan. The middle-aged Herder woman spread hardened butter on top of the fried bam. The smell of the frying bam was heavenly; the butter melted the moment it touched the bread's surface.

In addition to bam, the young woman was boiling vegetables in water for a soup. Chagum saw her add chicken, goat's milk and potatoes to the soup. Chagum usually hated goat's milk, but the young woman added leaves to the broth that took away the bad odor that Chagum remembered from the last time he'd drunk it.

Chagum took a cautious sip of the soup and found it well-seasoned and tasty. He ate as if he was starving, consuming his soup all in one go and dipping fried pieces of bam in honey. The children all ate their fill, too, as the Herder women bustled back and forth in the kitchen.

Chagum realized how much he'd eaten while he watched the children eat. He was much taller than everyone else here, so it made sense that he would need more food, but he felt guilty, somehow, like he'd stolen food out of the children's mouths. It was winter, and everyone in Kanbal was poor; this family likely didn't have much to spare.

When Chagum put his thoughts into words, the older Herder woman laughed at him. "Well, you've eaten it all up now, like a starving wolf. It's not like there's any way to get it back now."

The children giggled.

Chagum reddened slightly and looked down. "Forgive me," he said. "I haven't even thanked you, and I have no way to pay you..."

The middle-aged woman raised a hand to interrupt him. "Please don't concern yourself. Travelers pass through from time to time, and we help them even if they don't have money. Kanbal is poor; where would we spend it? And if we find ourselves short this winter, our neighbors will all share with us."

The younger woman smiled. “Besides, it’s been a good year for us. The growing season was warm and the goats are producing a lot of milk. Please don’t worry, young man. Eat as much as you like.”

“Thank you. I’ve eaten my fill already,” Chagum said. He placed his hands on his knees and stood up slowly, being careful not to hit his head on the ceiling. He went over to Balsa and knelt down to feel her forehead. She was burning up with a fever. Her lips were shriveled from thirst and she seemed to have trouble breathing.

The middle-aged Herder woman placed something in a wooden bowl of steaming water. “Lift her head and give her this to drink,” she said, holding the bowl out to Chagum.

Chagum lifted Balsa’s head carefully, supporting the nape of her neck on his knees. Balsa opened her eyes, but her gaze was unfocused. Chagum helped her drink the contents of the bowl, which smelled like a salty broth, but he wasn’t able to do it without spilling some on his sleeve. When Balsa was done drinking, he lay her down on the floor again.

When the middle-aged woman noticed Chagum’s worried expression, she smiled kindly and said, “Don’t worry. That soup is made with the roots of an ukka tree, which is very effective medicine. Her fever should go down by tomorrow morning.”

The old Herder woman was sitting near the hearth, chewing on something tough. She glanced at Chagum in sympathy. “She raised you, didn’t she?” she asked.

The middle-aged woman looked scandalized. “Grandma! This man is the Crown Prince of New Yogo!”

The old woman’s eyes widened at the revelation.

“You’re right,” Chagum said. “Balsa did raise me. She saved my life when I was a child, and she’s still protecting me.”

The old woman nodded sagely. “That’s what I thought. You have the face of a boy worried about his mother.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Chagum’s lips. Chagum had never heard of ukka root before, but Balsa’s breathing already seemed to be

easier.

The children at the table started clamoring for something. The middle-aged woman scolded them into silence. The oldest boy apologized to his mother.

Chagum sat next to Balsa and brought his knees to his chest, observing the children without really understanding what they were doing. He got the sense that every day was the same for this happy little family. They would pass the winter in this house, supported by their community.

I wonder what will happen to me this winter...where will I even be, a month from now?

He fell asleep listening to the children's laughter.

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Chagum slept like a log until past noon the next day. He dreamed about being tied up in Kahm's cellar with Balsa. Kahm's confession and the attack by the assassin happened in an endless loop, over and over again.

Even after Chagum opened his eyes, but image of Kahm's face lingered in his mind. His heart beat fast even though the danger was already past. He tried to shake himself free of the influence of his dream, but there was something pressing about it, something urgent that he absolutely had to remember. But whenever he reached for the memory, the critical information that he was looking for vanished like smoke.

Chagum sat up and felt pain radiate through all his sore muscles. It was quiet inside the house. He looked around and saw no one moving. Balsa was no longer near him. She sat near the fire, staring into it as if she were lost in thought. She had a bowl in her lap, so at least she'd eaten something. She was still very pale, but she seemed steadier than she had the previous night.

"What are you eating?" Chagum asked.

Balsa shifted the bowl in her lap. “Leftover soup from dinner,” she said. “They heated it up for me this morning.” Balsa looked and sounded a lot like her old self.

Chagum sat down next to Balsa near the fire. “Who are the people who live here, anyway?

“They’re weavers,” Balsa said. “The children look after the goat herds. I’m not sure of anything else--they were all gone when I woke up.” She set her empty bowl down and sighed. “I’m sorry. I brought us all this way for nothing.”

Chagum shook his head. He stared into the fire as he answered, “You couldn’t have known how things would work out. The future is never certain.” He rubbed his chin, finding it smooth and free of hair, unlike many of the Herder men he had seen who had full beards. He remembered the youngest Herder woman’s terrified face when she’d told the oldest woman that he was New Yogo’s Crown Prince.

“I guess there’s nothing for it,” Chagum said. “We tried. We have to get back to New Yogo now.”

Balsa nodded. “The Herders will put us up wherever we go--for a night, mind; they’re poor and don’t have much to spare. We should be able to rely on their hospitality until we reach Yonsa Clan lands. My aunt will give us food and supplies for the journey home.”

So much time had passed since Balsa had last been in New Yogo. She felt the weight of it, like sand in an hourglass falling on her chest and burying her. Chagum probably felt similarly. It would be good to go home, even if there wasn’t anything else they could do.

Chagum extended his hands over the fire.

“There’s a well outside,” Balsa said. “Go wash your face, then get ready. We should be able to reach the next Herder village before sunset if we leave soon.”

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Balsa and Chagum thanked the Herder women for putting them up for the night and for sharing their delicious food and medicine. They went outside to retrieve their horses from the goat pens in the village. Chagum saddled Balsa's horse and tightened the straps around its stomach. Balsa patted her horse and mounted up with a little laugh.

"It feels good to be back in the saddle again," she said.

Chagum smiled, then prepared his own horse for departure. The sky was clear and cloudless when they set out on their journey. The wind was cold; it finally felt like winter in Kanbal. They rode past the goat pens of the village and got back on the mountain road. Tiny birds flitted from tree to tree overhead; some flew directly in front of Balsa's face.

Surprised, Chagum pulled up on his reins. One small bird landed on his shoulder and stayed there as if it were tame.

"What a weird bird," Chagum muttered.

Balsa frowned. "I'm pretty sure Chirari followed us." She pointed toward the forest. Chirari and a young Kashal man were standing there; they waved.

Chagum felt his heart beat faster. Rota needed Kanbal's help to rebuff the Talsh, but Chagum had no choice but to go home and abandon them to their fate.

What should I do?

"We need to go to them," Balsa said. "I'm not strong enough yet for us to run away."

"You were gone so long that we guessed the alliance must have failed," Chirari said quickly. "But I was worried about you. I think it would be safest for all of us if we escorted you home."

The Kashal man had a little bird on his shoulder. "We managed to find your other horses, so we can all be mounted for the journey."

"One thing concerns me, though," Chirari said.

Chagum glanced over at Balsa.

"What's wrong?" Balsa asked.

"Kahm Musa is searching desperately for you," Chirari said quietly.

“We’ve had our animals scoping out Kahm’s castle,” the Kashal man said. “Kahm ordered his servants and retainers to find you. He’s having them search the villages and lassal, not the royal palace.”

Balsa frowned. “And what about the Talsh assassin?”

“Kahm tied him up and threw him in prison after you left. He’s under heavy guard. The man did try to kill him, after all.”

Chagum frowned. He felt like there was something that he should remember; the Kashal man’s words nearly brought the memory to the surface, but whenever he tried to grasp it, he lost it. He felt the same sense of urgency that he had from his dreams the previous night.

Kahm tied up the Talsh assassin. The Talsh assassin tried to kill him. And that means...

“Balsa,” Chagum said, reaching out for Balsa’s right hand. “We missed something. Why would the Talsh assassin be targeting Kahm if he was working with the Talsh? What reason would they have to kill him?”

Balsa looked at Chagum as if he’d gone mad. She blinked, but then she nodded slowly. “There was something that Kahm wasn’t telling us. I think...”

Chagum’s eyes shone bright with hope. “The Talsh assassin was listening to us,” he said. “He tried to kill Kahm because we were getting through to him. He knew that Kahm wouldn’t stay loyal to Talsh.

“I was so sure that there was no way to convince King Radalle to change his mind, but with Kahm’s help, we have a chance.” Chagum’s heartbeat was racing. “Balsa, I don’t know Kahm or the King of Kanbal at all, but from the information we have, it’s clear that the southern lords of Rota are being manipulated by Prince Hazar, not Prince Raul. Kahm told us that himself. Why would he tell us something like that if he didn’t intend us to use it? The Talsh are fighting each other from within. We wouldn’t know that if not for Kahm.

“Kahm never intended to betray the king at all,” Chagum breathed. “There was no need to attack me, or him, but the Talsh knew that if I told King Radalle that the Talsh weren’t a united front, it would be all

over. Kahm and King Radalle were wrong to trust the Talsh. We know that, of course, but they wouldn't have known unless we told them what was happening in Rota. The Talsh assassin was scared of what I'd say."

Chirari's eyes went wide. She coughed, then said, "I think you're right. We knew in the north that the Talsh had split into two factions, so of course we didn't trust them. They can't even trust one another."

The Kashal man nodded. "I suspect that's why Kahm is searching for you two in such a frenzy. He must have figured out what's going on in Talsh and wants to rethink Kanbal's alliance with them."

Chagum felt too warm, like he was burning up with a fever. Balsa was looking straight at him. "Are we sure we want to see Kahm?" Balsa asked. "Even if he wants to convince King Radalle to reconsider, it might not be worth the effort. King Radalle hates changing his mind once it's made up."

Everyone looked toward Chagum. The bird on the Kashal man's shoulder cheeped.

"Let's go to see Kahm," he said. "Even if we can't convince King Radalle, the King's Spears should know the truth of what's going on. We might be able to win them over, at least."

Chagum faced Balsa. "It may be a long shot, like you say, but I'd like to try."

Balsa nodded. "All right. But I intend to meet with Kahm first, alone."

"Uh..."

Balsa cut in before Chagum could say anything. "Don't worry; I don't intend to fall for the same trick twice. I'm sure that Kahm's castle is being watched by Talsh spies. It's safer for you not to be seen, Chagum."

Chagum's shoulder's slumped. "Yeah. You're probably right."

"Cheer up," Balsa said. "I think this is worth a try, too. And I'm a bodyguard; I know a few ways in that normal people don't."

Chagum appeared puzzled.

“Bandits and thieves are as common here as everywhere else,” Balsa said. “Most houses have a back door to escape from that’s hidden from prying eyes. That applies to castles, too.”

Balsa extended an open palm to Chirari. “I’m sorry to ask, but I need money. I’ll pay you back when I get our l get our things from Kahm.”

“That’s fine,” Chirari said, “but what are you planning to buy?”

Balsa smiled. “I want to buy goat cheese and rakkal wine from the Herders. It’s to thank them for their hospitality. They won’t accept charity, but they will accept money if I buy something.”

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Several traveling merchants visited Kahm’s castle the next morning. The merchants were all women who had come to sell food after hearing that an important storage warehouse had recently burned down. They carried baskets and packs on their backs and went into the castle through a rear entrance.

The women entered the west wing of the palace and walked past the kitchen. Several baskets of food were lined up on the polished stone floor. There was a large woman standing in the kitchen, prepared to make purchases. She was the head kitchen maid. She looked over the merchant women’s stock of butter and pickled goods, deciding which ones the castle would buy.

The merchant women sold most of their stock and went home with smiling faces. Only one woman remained behind, looking uncomfortable.

“You there,” the head kitchen maid said. “You can’t just sit around when you have nothing more to sell.”

The remaining woman stood up. She was uncommonly tall and wore a Rotan-style shuma face covering. When she removed her face covering, the head kitchen maid gasped.

Balsa smiled. “It’s been a long time, Martha.”

Chapter 3 - Hoi

When the meeting of the King's Spears convened in the presence of King Radalle, he felt like his worst fears were coming to pass. Several of the Kings' Spears had gone to Kahm Musa's castle the previous night to ask after their friend's health. The meeting today had been called to directly address the attack and fire that had happened at Kahm's castle.

Radalle stood still in front of the doors of the meeting hall. He took a deep breath to steady himself, then walked into the meeting chamber. There were two armed guards on the other side of the door, one standing to each side of the doorframe. They announced the arrival of the king with a fanfare played on flutes.

The King's Spears were chosen from Kanbal's nine clans. All of them were present in the hall, along with Radalle's two uncles and their sons. Those who were sitting stood up when Radalle entered. The King's Spears lifted their weapons heavenward, then slammed the butt of their spears onto the stone floor. The resounding echo of impact resonated through the hall.

Radalle approached the chair set aside for the King of Kanbal. He didn't look any of the King's Spears or his family members in the eye. When Radalle sat down, the chair was so thick and large that he felt like it was swallowing him up. He took a moment to compose himself, then looked up.

"You may be seated," Radalle said.

The King's Spears, Radalle's uncles and their sons all took their assigned seats. Only Kahm Musa remained standing. Radalle was startled not to see him take his seat. Kahm's left arm was severely wounded, so he found it difficult to hold his spear. There was a black band tied around the shaft of his weapon, as was customary when the Spears were mourning a fallen or injured comrade.

The oldest of all of the King's Spears, Hagu Muro, got to his feet and bowed to Radalle. "I open this meeting of the King's Spears in the name of King Radalle, who has been blessed by the benevolence of Yoram, God of Thunder. We have requested this meeting because of our failures regarding one of our own number, Kahm Musa. To be more precise, we are here to judge the failings of Kahm Musa himself."

"Kahm Musa's failings?" King Radalle asked. His uncles and nephews glanced at him and at one another. None of the King's Spears appeared surprised at Hagu Muro's announcement, but King Radalle's relatives were surprised. If Kahm Musa's faults were deemed grave enough, he would have to be dismissed and replaced.

"Speak, Kahm Musa," King Radalle said. "Explain yourself."

Kahm got to his knees on the floor, then placed his spear out in front of him. He bowed his head. "Your Majesty, I admit that I have made a grave error. I believed that our nation was in grave danger, so I acted swiftly to protect it. I ask you to hear what I have done, and my reasons for it, and then pass judgment. I believe that once you know everything, you will be able to guide us all in the right direction."

Kahm raised his head. His face was pale and drained of blood. When he spoke, his voice trembled, but he became steadier and more sure of himself as time went on. His voice was clearly audible to everyone in the hall. He started by explaining how he'd acquired so much information about the civil war in Rota, and how he'd intended to use that information to protect Kanbal from invasion. He told the assembled Spears and officials that he'd met Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo and about the attack on his person and his castle afterward. Kahm was not a very eloquent speaker, so the picture he painted of events was a bit unclear in places, but Radalle had no doubt that he was telling the truth.

Kahm said that he'd received another visit from Balsa the previous night. She had relayed a message to him from Crown Prince Chagum. Kahm took a breath, then faced King Radalle squarely. "I am certain that you already understand my errors in conduct, Your Majesty, but I

believe it is important to state them plainly. I believed everything I was told by the clan lords of southern Rota. They told me that they had an army on the upper Sangal peninsula, ready to support us in case we needed aid against invasion.

"But that was a lie. The army doesn't take orders from the Talsh Prince Hazar, who is allied with the southern clan lords. It takes its orders from Second Prince Raul. The brothers are locked in conflict over who will gain the right to conquer all of the nations on the northern continent. Looking at the placement of the army, it seems that Prince Raul will conquer New Yogo first, bolster the army of the northern lords in Rota, then combine his army with those of his allies and wage war on us. Prince Raul hasn't stated this in so many words, but I believe that this strategy is very possible."

The stoic expressions on the faces of the King's Spears started to crack. King Radalle's uncles and nephews whispered to one another and exchanged glances of alarm.

Kahm spoke louder so that his voice drowned out the whispers. "Your Majesty, I wanted only to back the winning horse in this conflict, to ensure that Kanbal would be safe. But I acted on bad information. There is no benefit for Kanbal in joining with Talsh. They will try to use our neutrality or meager resources to crush Rota more easily before turning their eyes to us."

The whispering in the hall became louder.

Radalle's face was colorless. Kahm struck the butt of his spear against the floor and restored silence. Everyone faced King Radalle. Radalle took a moment to compose himself, then said, "I understand the situation as you've laid it out so far, but what do you want us to do now? The southern lords of Rota have made their choice. Any alliance we might have had with Rota to help protect us would have been with the southern lords, anyway, and not the King of Rota. He's ever proposed an alliance with us."

"But he *has* proposed an alliance, Your Majesty," Kahm said quietly.

King Radalle's eyes widened. "What?"

Kahm's voice was shaking again when he said, "We've received a messenger from the King of Rota. Would you like to read it, Your Majesty?"

The whispers started up again.

"Wait...wait a moment," Radalle said. "Perhaps it's best if this part of the conversation takes place more privately." He sank back in his seat like he was trying to disappear inside it.

Hearing Radalle's indecisiveness, Hagu Moru stood up and said, "I think it would be better to invite the messenger from Rota here before us all, Your Majesty. You will have to make a decision based on this information, and we are all your closest advisors. There may be motives and meanings in the message that we should all interpret together."

Several other King's Spears nodded in assent. Others added their voices to Hagu Moru's.

Radalle sat up in his seat and said, "I will do as you advise. Have the Rotan messenger brought in."

Hagu Moru crossed the room and opened the door to the meeting chamber. The King's Spears and councilors had no idea who to expect, so when they caught sight of the messenger, they rose to their feet and caused an uproar.

The messenger himself was a young man from New Yogo who attracted little notice, but all of the King's Spears recognized Balsa as a spear wielder who had performed the Spear Dance at the Giving Ceremony of Luisha in the Mountain King's Hall. It took some time to recognize that Crown Prince Chagum was actually the messenger.

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When Chagum was led before the King of Kanbal, he bowed his head slightly in greeting, then said in Kanbalese, "I am glad that we could meet again, King Radalle. It seems like such a long time since we last greeted one another in Sangal."

Radalle said nothing in reply. He recognized Crown Prince Chagum's face easily, but there was no trace of the boy he had met several years ago in his expression or his movements. There was a long scar on along the side of his face, extending from his forehead all the way down his cheek. He was also severely sunburned from his long journey.

Radalle stared straight at Chagum and didn't look away. He rested his chin in his hand. "I'm happy to see you again as well, Crown Prince Chagum." He meant these words sincerely. His voice was calm; he felt some of his own tension draining out of him as he spoke. "We heard you had died at sea. I was glad when Kahm told me you survived."

Chagum smiled. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I never intended to do anything so reckless as that, but countless lives are depending on me. That's why I'm here."

Chagum's smile vanished as he removed a rolled-up tube of parchment from his breast pocket. "King Radalle, I am here as a representative of the kingdom of Rota. King Yosam is currently too ill to perform his duties, so his younger brother, Prince Ihan, is ruling in his stead. May I read out Prince Ihan's message here?"

Radalle nodded.

"You may. Listen carefully, everyone."

Chagum unfurled the scroll and read in a loud, clear voice: "In the name of the King of Rota, and possessing his full legal authority, I, Prince Ihan, swear that I will accept any proposed alliance with the King of Kanbal that is negotiated by Crown Prince Chagum of New Yogo.

"Crown Prince Chagum has my full understanding and support. His land is being overrun by the Talsh empire. Rota and Kanbal uniting in alliance is the best way for both countries to avoid the same fate. We are the rulers and leading diplomats of the northern continent; it wouldn't be fitting for us to give in to invaders without a fight.

"I consider the King of Kanbal to be an honorable man who is more courageous than he believes. He will always make the right decision for his people."

Chagum rolled up the scroll. It was so silent in the hall that Chagum could hear water dripping somewhere. He looked up at Radalle, who was seated above him on a low platform.

“King Radalle, please agree to form an alliance with the King of Rota,” Chagum said. “If you do, you’ll obliterate the Talsh empire’s invasion plan for the continent. I’ve seen southern Rota with my own eyes. If you capitulate to Talsh, you’ll be a ruler in name only; they subjugate every land they take swiftly and efficiently. Your people would be recruited as Talsh soldiers; those who remained would suffer from high taxes. Within months of capitulating, there were new fortresses built on Sangal peninsula and the Sangal navy was completely absorbed into the Talsh one. I saw the Sangalese sailors doing drills with Talsh soldiers when I was taken captive.” Chagum spoke without taking a breath; the whole room started to spin.

Chagum faced Radalle and said, “The fate of the northern continent depends on Kanbal. You can help end the civil war in Rota faster and prevent more needless deaths. Let us join our hands together in alliance and brace against the advancing wave.”

Radalle stared silently at Chagum.

“With Rota at peace, we’ll be able to add their armies to Kanbal’s and northern Rota’s. Agreeing to this alliance helps all our nations. Please!”

Radalle glanced around at the King’s Spears and his councilors. Radalle’s cousin, Aron, was seated to his right-hand side. Aron leaned forward in his chair and said, “There are too many unknowns. We know for sure that Rota is at war with itself. Rushing to their aid would deplete our own resources without any guarantee of gain.”

Chagum’s eyebrows shot up. Radalle looked at him with a bitter expression. “There is no guarantee that we would win against the Talsh even if we allied with southern Rota, which has the greater army and the most resources. Allying with the northern Rota is even more dubious.”

The King’s Spears nodded in agreement at Radalle’s words.

Radalle was torn. Kahm and Chagum did seem to have new information, but from what Radalle understood of the situation, his cousin Aron seemed to have the right of it. It was clear that Kanbal should protect its own interests and not get involved with Rota's messy state of affairs, but the situation wasn't that simple. The muscles of Radalle's chest felt tight as he pondered his decision. He had received a magnificent necklace from the Talsh ambassador that his wife dearly cherished. If he went back on his word with the Talsh now, he would be sneered at and ridiculed for wasting so much time and making such a mistake.

Radalle's heart beat faster. His mind went completely blank with panic. All of his councilors and the King's Spears looked at him with expressions of trepidation.

Chagum looked into Radalle's eyes. He was clearly at a loss for what he should do. Chagum remembered what Hagu Muro had told him while staying in his home the previous night: "King Radalle is kind-hearted by nature, but it takes time for him to make a decision. The King's Spears are all inflexibly loyal to him, as he is to us. We must abide by his decision, whatever it happens to be."

Chagum felt like he'd been frozen to the floor. He remembered his journey here and everything that had happened so that he could reach this place at this moment. He had fled from Prince Raul of Talsh and swum across the dark sea. He remembered how hopeless he'd felt then. He wanted so desperately to save his people, and all the people of the northern continent.

So many people had made sacrifices to get him here. So many sailors in New Yogo's navy were dead now. The Talsh army would land on the Nayoro peninsula and march on his home. He could see it all happening clearly before his eyes. It would all happen, if King Radalle made the wrong choice.

As he looked into Radalle's watery and indecisive eyes, he felt the stirrings of a cold rage. King Radalle had always been an isolationist monarch who put the needs of his people and his own personal needs

first. As time dragged on and King Radalle still didn't make a decision, Chagum's rage commingled with irritation. His vision went white and he shook all over.

He wanted to yank King Radalle forward by the collar and force him to listen. He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs that agreeing to the alliance would save untold thousands of lives.

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"Your Majesty," Aron said from Radalle's right-hand side. "This may be presumptuous of me, but upon further consideration, I do think that we should accept the alliance. Everyone here is in agreement."

Radalle frowned. Aron had only just argued for opposing the alliance--had the other councilors changed his mind in whispers? He looked at Crown Prince Chagum and saw the rage plainly on his face.

Sharp cold shot through Chagum's entire body. He saw that Radalle was still undecided. He felt like he was facing down an ice wall. All he needed to do was find a crack.

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"King Radalle!" Chagum called out in a bright, high voice. "The Princes of New Yogo are the children of Ten no Kami, King of the Heavens. They never kneel to anyone, and yet..."

Radalle was surprised. The look he gave Chagum was completely uncomprehending.

"I will kneel before you now," Chagum said. His voice shook and so did his hands.

Several men in the chamber gasped as Chagum got to his knees and brought his head all the way to the floor directly in front of King Radalle. "King Radalle, I am bowing down before you as the son of a god

to beg you. Make the courageous decision and save your people--and mine."

Chagum broke out into a cold sweat. He was shaking uncontrollably and couldn't stop.

"I will..." Radalle said hoarsely. "I will agree to the alliance."

Chagum lifted his head a bare inch from the floor. Radalle was looking at him as if he was the strangest person he'd ever seen.

"I agree, so please raise your head and stand up," Radalle said. "I'll send a messenger to Rota right away."

Chagum's ears were ringing. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He looked up at Radalle and didn't say a word. Having accomplished his

task, Chagum felt so utterly exhausted that he didn't think he could stand.

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After the alliance was sealed, King Radalle pronounced his judgment on Kahm Musa.

Withholding information and acting without the King Radalle's knowledge or consent were grave offenses. But he had also brought forward critical new information regarding Rota that led directly to the alliance. His loyalty to the king himself had never been questioned, and his military might would be needed in a campaign against a foreign nation, so King Radalle decided that Kahm's offenses would be forgiven if he returned from war victorious.

The meeting of the King's Spears and councilors turned into a war council. Chagum told King Radalle and the assembled officials everything he knew about the Talsh army: its numbers, composition, naval technology and everything else he'd seen. Kanbal's own army amounted to roughly fifteen thousand cavalry.

King Radalle gave the order for all Talsh emissaries in the palace to be arrested and detained, but when his guards went to their guest rooms, they were already gone.

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Chagum went out onto a veranda in the palace garden after eating lunch. He had achieved his goal, but he didn't feel happy or relieved. He had humbled himself before King Radalle and felt nothing but a profound sense of shame.

Chagum thought that he'd thrown away his pride as the Crown Prince of New Yogo when he'd rejected the title and thrown himself overboard near the coast of Rota, but it seemed that this was not the

case. He had been raised as the child of Ten no Kami, God of the Heavens; that wasn't something that was easy to forget. Going on his knees before King Radalle was an insult to both his pride and his person. He felt his face go hot whenever he remembered it.

The clouds were gold-red in the sky as the sun started sinking toward the horizon. Balsa heard footsteps behind her and turned around.

"You really surprised me," Balsa said. "I thought you were going to yell at the king for a minute there. I never thought you'd actually kneel to him."

Chagum looked away from her.

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds. Balsa glanced over at Chagum and said quietly, "That was a brilliant example of 'hoi,' don't you think?"

Chagum looked at Balsa in confusion for a moment, but then he nodded in comprehension. There were times when sacrificing just one thing made the difference in saving everything else. Chagum's fearful and puzzled expression transformed as he offered her a tentative smile.

Balsa smiled back at him.

Chapter 4 - At the Bottom of the Sea

Chagum awoke suddenly from a dream. He sat up in his canopy bed and wiped sweat from his forehead. He was staying in a room of the royal palace reserved for guests of state. Chagum looked up at the thickly woven canopy in the light of a candle resting on a side table.

He forgot what he'd been dreaming about the moment he'd opened his eyes. He had an uneasy feeling that didn't fade even after he was fully awake. He had been having dreams every night lately. They weren't nightmares, exactly, but he always woke up with his heart racing and goosebumps rising on his skin. He felt like there was a need to hurry, but he didn't know why.

He was going to accompany the Kanbalese army to Rota before heading back to his homeland of New Yogo. It was possible that the sense of urgency he felt in his dreams came from that; there was a lot to be done before he and the army were ready to depart. But Chagum didn't feel like that was the case. The burning impatience he felt had another cause, but he couldn't put it into words.

This place is close to Nayugu...

Chagum felt like he was about to be drawn into Nayugu at any time. The smell of Nayugu's water followed him everywhere in this palace.

I'm leaving in two days. I'll be fine.

The cavalry would be ready to depart in the morning just two days from now. The baggage trains and supply lines for the army should all be prepared by tonight. The delay in preparations was mostly caused by the distance people had to travel to muster up and by the sudden shortage of very fast horses as they were snapped up by the army.

Chagum lay back in bed and closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep, but he was also afraid to. He was hovering right on the border of wakefulness when he heard the sound of a Herder whistling. He fell asleep listening to the sound.

When Chagum awoke, he stretched extravagantly and looked over at Balsa, who lay in the bed across the room. She was sitting up slightly and looking out the window. It was nearly dawn.

“It’s early. Sorry,” Balsa said. “But you should get dressed.”

Chagum rubbed his eyes and got out of bed. The floor was as cold as ice and his teeth chattered. “Did something happen?” Chagum asked.

Balsa passed a folded set of Kanbalese winter clothes over to Chagum. “The Herders have summoned the King and the King’s Spears to the caves.”

Chagum blinked in surprise. “The Herders can summon the King of Kanbal?”

Balsa nodded. “You’ve probably noticed, but the Herders and the Kanbalese people and the Herders come from completely different lineages. While Kanbalese people live and work in the mountains above ground, the Herders are born from the heart of the mountains. Kanbal has two different worlds: the surface world, and the world under the mountains. The two worlds don’t have equal power or authority. When the Mountain King’s people summon the King of Kanbal, he must answer.”

Chagum listened to Balsa’s explanation as he pulled on thick woolen clothes.

“I know you were angry at the Herders for refusing to summon King Radalle to the Mountain King’s Hall, but doing that would be a warping of the natural order, or at least bending the rules. The Mountain King only calls the King of Kanbal for specific reasons, and those reasons don’t include forging an alliance with foreign nations. I should have anticipated that before we went to the Herders for help. Forgive me.” She smiled a bit regretfully, then handed Chagum a thick karro coat and a shuma face covering.

“The Herders have asked me to guide you to the heart of the mountain,” Balsa said.

Chagum and Balsa went out into the hallway. There was no one around. Walking through the deserted palace in the pre-dawn light felt

eerie and dreamlike. Usually, the northern door to the king's chamber was locked tight, but today it was wide open. There weren't even any guards in front of it.

Balsa and Chagum left the palace and went outside. The overwhelming smell of the water of Nayugu surrounded Chagum. He and Balsa were behind the palace; mountains towered overhead. A little way ahead, there was the wide opening of a cave. When Chagum was standing directly in front of it, he saw the wide expanse of a deep lake. The lake wasn't in Sagu, but in Nayugu. The lake's surface was the deep blue color of lapis lazuli.

Is this part of Nayugu's ocean? Or is it different? Chagum thought.

Goosebumps prickled on his arms. He was starting to understand the urgency of his dreams. Near the edge of the lake, he could see the rocky bottom clearly, but as he and Balsa entered the cave, it was impossible to see much of anything. He was sure that the water level of this lake had risen recently, and dramatically. He stared at Nayugu's lake and could not look away.

"Are you all right?" Balsa asked. Her voice came from far off, as if Chagum was hearing her from underwater.

Chagum took a deep breath and reached frantically for Balsa. "Hold onto my hand, Balsa. This cave...isn't safe."

Balsa nodded. She squeezed Chagum's hand to reassure him. The walked through the cave together, side by side.

It was dark inside the caves, but a faint light emanated from the walls at irregular intervals. The path sloped gently downward for a long way, then flattened out and expanded in width. At the end of the path, there was an enormous cavern. This was where Balsa had fought the hyoulu in the Spear Dance at the Giving Ceremony.

The King's Spears were in the cavern, sitting on the floor. They stood up to face Balsa and Chagum. Many Herders stood behind the King's Spears in the cavern. Their eyes were not glowing. Chagum found it difficult to focus on the Herders because of all the water in this chamber. Like the rest of the caves, this cavern was completely

submerged in Nayugu's water. Countless spirits swam in its depths. There was a soft sound like tinkling bells as the spirits danced and darted around one another. Water bubbles tickled Chagum's skin. He couldn't identify all of the spirits, but many of them were Yona Ro Gai, water dwellers that he had seen often in New Yogo.

There was a large, perfectly round hole at Chagum's feet. It was in Nayugu and not Sagu; it seemed like Balsa and the Kanbalese people couldn't see it. The hole looked like the opening of a den or a nest to Chagum. The opening's walls were smooth as if they'd been polished.

Chagum wanted to run away from this place. Every fiber of his being was commanding him to flee. He gripped Balsa's hand hard. Balsa squeezed back with equal force. Her grip didn't calm him, but it reminded him why he was here.

It was too warm in the cave because of the water. Chagum resisted the impulse to wipe sweat off his forehead and looked at the assembled Herders.

The Herders and the King's Spears seemed to be waiting for something. After a few minutes, one old Herder walked out in front of the others. Chagum remembered him as the Herder who had refused to lead him here before.

"So you really are an *oi ragi,*" the old Herder said. "The woman who took you in was my granddaughter's daughter. She told me that your body was always about to pass into Noyook. I didn't believe her, but now that I've seen you with my own eyes...well, I'll have to apologize to her later."

"What's an *oi ragi*?" Chagum asked.

"*Oi ragi* means 'overlapping worlds.' It means that you can see the normal world and Noyook simultaneously. Isn't that right? Most of the people above aren't born with that ability, but you saw Noyook the moment you entered the caves, didn't you?"

Chagum took a deep breath to steady himself. The old Herder was definitely talking about Nayugu, though he called it Noyook. "Yes, I can

see Na--Noyook, and this world, just like you said. But the Herders are the same, aren't they? Can't you see Noyook, too?"

"Yes, but not as freely as you can," the old Herder said. "We derive this power from the Mountain King, and can share it with the Kanbalese under certain circumstances."

The old Herder turned away from Chagum and faced King Radalle. "Your Majesty, if you doubt the truth of any of our claims, please ask this young man to confirm them."

Radalle blinked, then coughed. "So you can...see something? Down here?" he asked Chagum.

Chagum swallowed. "I see that we're surrounded by deep blue water. It's like being at the bottom of the sea. In this world, we're in a cave under the mountains, but in Noyook, this place is completely underwater. I first saw it when I entered the caves. I can't tell where Noyook's ocean ends--it's huge." He paused, then said, "There are spirits swimming in the water. Lots of them. Some are familiar, but there are others with shapes that I've never seen before. Their swimming looks like--like dancing. And, um..." He looked around, squinting. "They seem to be in pairs. All the spirits have a matching one near them."

The King and the King's Spears all exchanged glances. The old Herder approached Chagum and touched his shoulder.

"Turn around," the old Herder said. "Can you see anything else?"

Chagum turned and saw a mountain rising out of the ground behind him. It was part of a much larger mountain range. The peaks of the mountains were above Nayugu's water--just--but most of the range was submerged. Seeing green trees growing on the mountains through a water haze gave Chagum a strange feeling, like the world had been turned upside-down.

"If the water gets much higher..." Chagum gulped. "All of those mountains will be underwater, too."

The old Herder nodded. “Yes. We Herders have noticed the water level rising little by little over the years. You’ve probably heard that it is spring in Noyook now. The snow on Noyook’s mountains is melting; the snowmelt flows down into the ocean.

“Spring in Noyook only comes once every four hundred years. The ocean rises, the mountains are drowned, and all of the spirits gather here and other sacred spaces. So many spirits have arrived here in recent years via a great migration from the nations to the south. New life is born on the ocean shore.”

Chagum remembered seeing the spirits migrating when he’d crossed the ocean from New Yogo to Sangal. They’d formed a long line of light like a river of stars in the sky, flowing from the south to the north.

“The ocean is warm. You feel it, right?” the old Herder asked. “The warmth of the water makes our world warmer, too.” He looked at King Radalle and the King’s Spears. “You must have felt that the weather has been warmer recently, too. Our winters have been less harsh for the past few years. This happens whenever the season in Noyook changes to spring. The grass grows thicker; the goats birth more young; there are more fish in the rivers and lakes. Goats produce more milk, for their young and for us. Thanks to this abundance of food, our own families grow, too.”

The old Herder stopped speaking. He faced Chagum again, frowning. “For the most part, spring in Noyook is something to celebrate, but there is another side to it. All this water is dangerous.”

“There have been landslides in this province,” King Radalle said, “and on Musa and Yonsa clan lands. Lots of them, and getting worse, because the weather’s been so warm.”

“It’s only going to get warmer,” the old Herder said severely. “Landslides and avalanches will be more frequent and more severe. We investigated the mountain caves over winter to determine how far the water extends and how deep it is at various points. Many new fissures have opened up in the ground from the pressure already.”

The King's Spears whispered darkly to one another. After a moment, Kahm got to his knees and said, "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but may I be permitted to speak?"

"You may," King Radalle said.

"I received a message from my father Kaguro yesterday," Kahm said. "It said almost the same thing as what Crown Prince Chagum and Toto the Elder just did. He wants to evacuate villages in the areas of greatest risk for landslides."

Dagu Yonsa, another King's Spear, removed a rolled-up piece of parchment from his breast pocket. "My father sent the same request," he said. "There are hundreds of people in low-lying areas that could easily be wiped out by one bad avalanche."

"The problem is where," one of the other King's Spears said. "My clan has asked the Herders, but it doesn't seem like there's any safe place to evacuate to."

"How do we know where these landslides will happen? Is there any way to tell?" another man asked.

"Even if there a place safe enough to evacuate to, would it be able to accommodate all the people who will have to flee their homes?"

King Radalle lifted both hands, commanding silence. "One at a time," he said. "I can't understand anything when everyone talks at once. Let's discuss the requested evacuations in more detail after we return to the palace. I'm sure there's something we can do."

Hagu Muro nodded. "Your Majesty is right. We may be able to temporarily evacuate our people south to Rota until the danger passes."

The other King's Spears visibly relaxed.

King Radalle faced Toto the Elder. "I believe you," he said. "Please tell us everything you've learned while investigating the caves. If there are safe places in Kanbal to flee to, tell us at once and I'll send out messengers as soon as possible."

Toto the Elder nodded. "Of course we will tell you. We are messengers of the mountain; it is our duty to inform you whenever we

sense a disaster."

Chagum was overwhelmed with the desire to run away from this place again. What he feared did seem to be some kind of disaster.

Toto the Elder looked up at Chagum. "You're one of the people from beyond the Misty Blue Mountains. Are you their leader?"

"Uh, my father is."

Toto the Elder nodded. "Then we'll tell you what we know, too. Noyook's ocean covers much of New Yogo now, too. The water level is much higher this year compared to previous ones. Your land is also under threat of natural disasters."

Chagum felt a cold hand close around his heart. He felt exhausted, cold, and numb. If all the water on the mountains melted and traveled through New Yogo's waterways...

The Blue Bow and Bird Song rivers both flowed past Kosenkyo. If they both overflowed, there would be a terrible flood. A flood so huge that the depths of the water could cover mountains.

"Chagum." Balsa gripped his shoulder.

"Balsa," Chagum gasped. His breaths were coming shallowly now. "The capital...Kosenkyo... I have to go home. I have to warn everyone before it's too late."

Balsa slapped his shoulder for reassurance, but Chagum was not reassured. "You know you can't go back. Not right now."

Chagum's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Think about it," Balsa said. "If you went back to the capital right now and told everyone that a disaster was coming, what would happen?"

Chagum understood what Balsa meant. Even if he relied on his status as the child of a god to get people to believe him, his father never would. And if the Mikado didn't realize there was a disaster, Chagum claiming that there would be one would only make him angry.

Chagum and the Mikado had been at odds since Chagum's childhood. If Chagum claimed that there would be a disaster, the

Mikado would claim the opposite. The words of the Mikado were the words of a god.

“I’ll go to New Yogo,” Balsa said. “I’ll warn Torogai, and Shuga, and everyone else who can get the message out. They’re smart; they’ll figure out a way to get people to safety.”

Chagum’s eyes were full of fear and doubt.

“Besides, I’m worried about Tanda.” Balsa smiled. “Leave it all to me.”

Chagum bit his lip. He stared at Balsa for a long time in tense silence, then nodded.

Epilogue: Alam Lai La

The gate in front of the royal palace opened wide. An announcer called out to the assembled Kanbalese people as cavalry riders sped out of the gate.

Balsa was part of the crowd; she looked upon the shiny tack of the horses and strong shoulders of the riders with a shared sense of national pride. The cheering crowd was loud enough to spook the horses, but the riders kept their mounts under control.

Hagu Muro and Kahm Musa rode at the front of the line of mounted warriors. Chagum rode between them, keeping just a little bit behind their horses like he didn't want to be seen. Unlike the other riders, he looked fearful and apprehensive, not proud and brave.

Balsa caught Chagum's eye and gave him a nod of farewell. He smiled at her briefly and bowed his head, but he was frowning again by the time he passed her by.

More riders lined up behind Chagum and the others as they began their long journey toward Rota. Balsa mounted her own horse and turned away from them.

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Balsa...good luck, Chagum thought. *I hope you reach Torogai and Shuga safely.*

Chagum swayed a little in his saddle. Even if Balsa did manage to warn Torogai and Shuga before disaster struck, saving everyone in Kosenkyo and the surrounding villages would be extraordinarily difficult. Chagum wanted to believe that they would succeed.

New Yogo was beset by invaders from the south and a terrible disaster from the north. *But I can't think about that right now. I can only deal with one disaster at a time.*

Chagum could do more about the Talsh invasion than he could about the threat of natural disaster. He would return to his home someday--assuming it survived all the calamities ahead. He felt a sudden sensation of warmth, like Balsa's hand on his cheek when they'd said goodbye.

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King Radalle had given Balsa new clothes, armor and equipment the day before. Chagum looked like a brave warrior in the new armor, but he knew that he was marching off to war. He would have to kill people, or order people killed.

Balsa sat near a fire in their shared guest room with her spear in her hand, polishing its blade. Chagum sat down next to her. “Do you ever really forget how terrible it is to kill someone?” he asked.

Balsa’s hand stilled on the point of her spear. “I never thought it would be easy to kill people,” she said, “but I was wrong. It was very easy, as long as I could justify their deaths to myself. But the only justification that wound up making sense to me was to kill only to protect myself or other people whose lives were threatened.”

Balsa looked up at Chagum. “But, no. You never do forget how terrible it is to kill a person--not deep down, where it matters. My wounds heal after every battle, but killing a person is a crime against your soul. It’s a wound that never heals.”

The corners of Balsa’s mouth twitched upward in a smile. “When I was used to killing, I made all kinds of excuses, but even then, I was losing myself a little bit at a time.” The light of the fire danced over her cheekbones. “I’m sorry I don’t have a more comforting answer. I probably would, if I were your mother. There are some things in this world that we have to do, whether we choose them or not. And there are things that no one person can accomplish on their own. I think that’s why it hurts to much to kill. It feels like there should have been another way, but it’s outside our control.”

Balsa returned to polishing the spearhead. “It’s a contradiction to save some people by killing others. That contradiction bothers me every day. You are also on a contradictory path; you’ll need to kill some to save everyone else. I don’t know a way around that contradiction. I wish I did.”

Balsa smiled again, but it didn't reach her eyes. "But I will say that saving some people is worth it." She touched Chagum's scarred cheek lightly with one hand. "I never thought that I would get to see the little boy I saved from the river grow up."

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The warmth of Balsa's hand on his cheek lingered in Chagum's memory as he rode into Kanbal's mountains. The riders paused briefly at noon so that the army could eat, but then pressed on until sunset. When the clouds in the sky were stained red and the sun sank low on the horizon line, Kahm Musa and Hagu Muro called a halt so that the men could eat dinner, but the army was swiftly on their way again.

The mountain peaks all around were bathed in the red-pink light of early evening. The color was like a blush on the cheeks of a little girl.

"Alam lai la," Chagum said. Dagu Yonsa, who was riding next to him, blinked at Chagum in surprise.

"You know the Yonsa dialect of Kanbalese, Your Majesty?" Dagu asked. The scene really was alam lai la: a glorious pink mountain sunset.

The sun loves the mountains, who are the mother of the Kanbalese people. The sun shows its affection to our mother before going to sleep for the night, as it has for a thousand years.

Chagum smiled and turned his face to the sun. He squinted his eyes. The air smelled like snow. Rota was on the other side of these mountains. He felt like the sunlight was making a path of light for him, though it was probably just an optical illusion. He would go to Rota, and then, finally, he would get to go home.

Chagum had chosen his own path. Enveloped in sun-kissed mountains, he followed the light.

This is the end of Guardian of Heaven and Earth - Kanbal. The story continues in Guardian of Heaven and Earth - New Yogo.

Afterword/Author's Notes

Words can't express how relieved I felt when Balsa and Chagum were finally reunited. I've written about these characters for more than ten years; they're part of me now, though of course they aren't exactly like me. They've spent a lot of time apart in this series, but when they were finally reunited, it was like no time had passed at all.

I've been planning for Chagum to go to Rota since *Traveler of the Blue Road,* but the story of Balsa and Chagum traveling to Kanbal and seeing Balsa's homeland had to come first. In the next and last volume, Balsa and Chagum will reunite again in New Yogo. I hope you continue to follow them on their journey.

Uehashi Nahoko
August 20, 2006
Abiko